


UNPARALLELED,  
INESCAPABLE DESIRE . . .  
A LOVE ALL-CONSUMING  
AND ETERNAL

16396 \$1.95

An illustration of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace on a rooftop at night. The man is wearing a white shirt and the woman is wearing a red dress. In the background, there is a cityscape with a large building and a full moon.

# THIS RAVAGED HEART

BARBARA RIEFE

A TUMULTUOUS ROMANCE IN THE TRADITION OF  
WICKED LOVING LIES

Rev. J. J. J.  
18-223

## LISA

The beautiful, delicate young woman who left her native England to marry Ross Dandridge, the scion of the wealthiest shipbuilding family in Rhode Island.

## LISA

The victim of an insidious plot designed by a mysterious, evil woman—a scheme that would sweep her across oceans and continents far from the arms of her lover.

## LISA

The devoted wife whose terrifying plight would call for unusual strength and courage and literally drive her to hell and back to be reunited with her husband.

***THIS  
RAVAGED  
HEART***  
***BARBARA RIEFE***

PLAYBOY PRESS

**THIS RAVAGED HEART**

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Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada by Playboy Press, Chicago, Illinois. Printed in the United States of America. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 76-51626. First edition.

Books are available at quantity discounts for promotional and industrial use. For further information, write our sales-promotion agency: Ventura Associates, 40 East 49th Street, New York, New York 10017.



TO ALAN WITH LOVE

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*Take a lump of clay,  
Wet it, pat it,  
Make a statue of you  
And a statue of me  
Then shatter them, clatter them,  
Add some water,  
And break them and mold them  
Into a statue of you  
And a statue of me.  
Then in mine, there are bits of you  
And in you there are bits of me.  
Nothing ever shall keep up apart.*

—KUAN TAO-SHENG

**BOOK ONE**  
**RETURN TO BLACKWOOD**

## I

The *Olympia* sprang forward, slicing through the ice-blue water, making her wide way westward along the fortieth parallel toward the distant port of New York. She was a sleek, lovely lined clipper ship, skillfully crafted to bear and challenge the roughest seas. Her cleanly raked bow, its sprit pointing the way, stood thrust against the shoulders of a green and gilded mermaid, a thunderbolt high in her right hand, her unseeing eyes fixed on the mist-shrouded horizon. Now, like a great creature rooting, the ship's bow dipped, plunging the wooden bolt bearer into the roiling sea, rising, lifting her free, a sheet of blue water boiling white flinging back over the foredeck. Overhead the howling wind bullied and bellied the sails, stretching every rope-yarn, every thread of canvas as taut as a fiddle string.

Two hands, snugly jacketed against the icy spume and the wind sowing it, stood on the afterdeck. Eyes uplifted, they studied the sullen sky. One's face was fringed with a gray beard trimmed in the Nantucket fashion, a squinty-eyed, leather-cheeked man a hundred voyages older than his companion. The younger man—clean-shaven, as gawky as a marionette, all bones and height and hawk features—shook his head.

"If he keeps this up we'll either take off like a bird or rip to tatters. There's no ship can take this gale at this speed."

"This is a Dandridge clipper, lad," reflected the other, clinging to the rail and sending a slender jet of tobacco juice away with the wind. "This rig can haul a hurricane inside out and never lose a cringle.\* A little weather

\*An iron or rope thimble or grommet worked into or attached to the edges or corners of a sail.

run like this never hurt any well-built vessel, leastwise a Dandridge clipper."

"I still say the skipper's good sense must have gone over the taffrail with his breakfast leavings."

"He's just showing off for the builder's son, young Ross. Him and his bride are in the fancy cabin up forward, the one with the frog furniture and the lacy curtains 'round the portholes. Riding free passage, I shouldn't wonder, professional courtesy on the part o' Messrs. Baldwin & Baldwin, extended to the builder."

"And why in thunder would this grand rush to perdition impress the likes o' him?"

"He's a Dandridge, lad. Speed and more speed. He's Cyrus' grandson and Gray's son, the next in line to build clippers bigger, sleeker, faster than McKay or Webb or any six men on earth."

"What's he look like, this Mr. High-and-Mighty Dandridge Number Three?"

"Big chap, dark curly hair, fine-looking features, shoulders wide as the gangway. One you wouldn't want to tangle with, drunk or sober. They say he's smashed a few bones in his time, though right now he's busy smashing other things. Him and his limey lovely been locked in and at each other ever since we cleared Mizen Head. And with two weeks or more ahead o' us, chances are we won't see either of 'em afore we drop anchor."

"That's crazy! No man can fornicate two weeks running without let up! What women would tolerate such abuse?"

"The one enjoying such abuse. From what I hear, Mr. Ross Dandridge has cut one wide swath among the ladies in his twenty-three years. The big reason his father packed him off to Europe for the Grand Tour."

The younger man furrowed his brow and shook his head. "Why in hell any man would want to run about Europe looking at broken-down buildings, and paying good money to some mincy frog for lecturing him on how they got that way, beats me."

"That's culture, lad. The young limeys do it, so naturally the Americans feel they got to. But it wasn't his choice, like I say; 'twas the family shipped him out."

"A little rest from cards and liquor and whores."

"And more. One o' his ladyfriends turned up a bit of scandal."

"He knock her up?"

"Nothing so trivial. No, it's claimed he got into a duel over her and wound up shooting her discarded boyfriend dead as a mackerel."

"Didn't they arrest him?"

"For dueling? Not a chance, not with fifteen witnesses to swear the other fellow fired first, not to mention challenging him. Besides, the law in Rhode Island doesn't go about arresting Dandridges, not for anything as slight as shooting somebody, that is. Anyhow, off he goes to Europe and now he's coming home with a big surprise for the family."

"I saw her coming aboard. What a beauty. Fair, slender, with breasts to make a man drool. Skin like a baby's, and that red hair. . . . I wouldn't mind being locked in with the likes of her for the next two weeks!"

"And by the time we're heading up the Narrows for port they'd be mopping up what's left o' you into a swill bucket and tossin' it over the fantail to the gulls."

"I'll wager you a hard dollar she wears him down to half the size of a Gold Coast monkey before we raise Montauk."

"You're on!"

The voice of doom in the person of the first mate poking his red face out of the nearest gangway brought a sudden end to the conversation.

"If all you two got to do is stand about jawing all day perhaps you're better off with your arses aloft and checking the main top-gallant. We seem to be catching a bit o' flap up there."

The older man craned his neck. "Looks tight as a trivet to me, Mr. Landry."

"Up, the two o' ye!"

In the cabin, lying on the silken-sheeted bed, Lisa Allworth Dandridge rolled over, smiling in anticipation, the tip of her tongue touching her upper lip as once more she drew the bronzed giant down upon her great breasts and his hungry mouth down to her own. The kiss was deliciously long, their mouths working, appeasing the hunger each held for the other. Her slender fingers, gripping the back of his head, slipped slowly down his neck, parting, spreading to his shoulders, grasping them firmly as the fire within her blazed upward, rushing to every corner of her being. So sudden and so all-consuming was it that for a moment a giddy feeling seized her, but then he drew his mouth away to kiss her cheek, up and down its plane, down her neck and across her shoulder. The sensation of dizziness deserted her, giving way to impatience and the overwhelming desire to begin.

She felt herself going limp at the sound of his whispered words of love and his hand slipping upward over her breast, caressing it tenderly.

This was her man, she thought, her chosen love for life, for all eternity, come from a distant wilderness land to claim her as his own and to bring her back with him: this young giant to whom she so willingly, so eagerly submitted, the maker and sharer of her ecstasy.

Her nails dug deep into his shoulderblades in restless anticipation of the inevitable, beautiful joining of their bodies. But still his hand continued to fondle her breasts, the heat of his fingertips enlarging and hardening the nipples. Then slowly it deserted her upper body, slipping downward over her white stomach, finding her thighs and separating them as he shifted his weight, preparing to mount.

She moaned softly, repeatedly, until his hot mouth smothered hers. Then the cabin, the ship, the world dissolved into nothingness, as they had previously, repeatedly, ever since the coast of Ireland had faded into the gray-green fog erasing sight and sound of the terns



and gulls dusting the sky and the tall ships riding at anchor along the wharf at Mizen Head.

The searching for secret sources of passion within her, the delicious experimentation, the surging, soul-lifting climaxes, the glorious oneness had gone on and on, each enchanting assault culminating in exhaustion. Brief rest would follow, a resummoning of strength, a rekindling of desire and then resumption.

Time spun out its golden thread that burned without fire and crumbled to dust. Now, lying naked side by side, they stared at the large unlit copper lamp swinging lazily overhead and listened to the groaning of the ship. The cabin was not large, but it was strikingly well furnished, the walls paneled in rosewood and richly ornamented with imitation inlaid gold. The ceiling surrounding the lamp was as white as a wave top and framed with handsomely wrought molding with gilded beads. Two overstuffed chairs, with stout mahogany legs to match the sideboard and bedstead, occupied the open corners on either side of a lowboy attached, as was the sideboard, to a wall in the event of heavy seas.

"I could do it from now 'til doomsday," she whispered, turning her enormous green eyes upon him.

"Good God, woman, what do you take me for, a machine?"

"Of course!" She laughed, the sound of tinkling crystal.

"Please." He grinned warmly, slipping the fingers of his hand into her hair and gripping it gently. "If you've no pity for me, think of the poor hands who bet on me to wear you out."

Bolting upright, freeing her hair, she glared green fire. "What did you say?"

"I—"

"Are you telling me that these—sailors are gambling on our sex?"

"Which of us will wear out the other first."

"They actually told you—"

"Lower your voice, darling, please. Nobody's said a word. Figure it out for yourself. Two newlyweds lock themselves in, the ship sails and the money goes down. Which one will come staggering out first, reeling to the rail with capitulation glazing her eyeballs?"

"Her? You flatter yourself! I'll have you know, Mr. Ross Richard Dandridge, that there isn't a man alive who can crumple this lady, in this bed or any other, any time!"

"You sound as if you speak from wide experience."

"Slightly wider than this ocean!"

He raised himself on one elbow, waving defensively. His brown, almost black eyes danced. "You don't have to convince me, lady, I believe you with all my heart. But you might show a little sympathy for my backers."

"And cheat my own? Bother anybody stupid enough to put his money on the man!" Her hands flew to his cheeks. "Kiss me!"

Laughing, he ran his right hand across the warm, inviting softness of her stomach and around her back, seizing her, crushing her against his chest and kissing her passionately.

"I love you, my husband," she gasped, freeing herself and catching her breath. "Yankee brute!" Tilting her head back, she giggled, then caught herself short, turning to stare at him, and sobering. "We're for it, aren't we?"

"For what?"

"Coming back like this, marching into the cannon's mouth."

"What are you worrying about? We're married. You've got a ring and the paper to prove it, to frame and hang above our bed in that musty old mausoleum we'll be calling home for the next century or so."

"You're teasing. Blackwood can't be that bad."

He laughed, throwing his arms wide, his jet black curly hair catching the light of the sun filtering in through the slit between the porthole curtains.

"You don't know the half of it. I'm going to entomb you, my Red Queen. I've snatched you from your island

to fetch you over and shut you up in a dingy cell like a medieval nun, lock you in with Bible and beads and fantasies and rodent companions for life!"

"Stop that!" Her hand covered his mouth, but he freed it.

"Seriously, darling, Blackwood is a lot less menacing than it sounds. It's actually quite pleasant. Dozens of rooms, well lit, if and when the sun shines, airy, woodsy smelling—especially on rainy days—a dining room two-thirds the size of Queen Victoria's, gardens Le Notre would be proud of, the envy of all our neighbors."

"You do have neighbors?"

"Not exactly within hailing-distance. We have almost eight hundred acres, with the house smack in the center, but there are estates around us. There are the Whiteheads; she's crazy as a loon, runs through the woods half-naked on summer nights. The Farleys aren't half bad; he's on the political ladder, slipping mostly, rather than climbing, living on his father's millions: railroads snaking about the country. There's the Slaters, you'd like her; she's pretty and witty and doesn't carry a knife in her bag. In Providence society it isn't easy to find someone you can trust, but you can trust Emily Slater. You'll make friends, you'll have female companionship, I promise. If that's what's worrying you."

"You make it sound dull as dishwater."

"It is. We'll have to provide our own amusement." He began fondling her breasts gently, lovingly. Claspings his hands, she brought them down to her lap.

"Are there horses?"

"Of course, stalls as far as the eye can see. Our stables are so big, the US cavalry keeps its horses there between wars. Cyrus loves horses, he has four hundred."

"Liar!"

"Say it again. I love that vicious curl when you spread that delectable mouth of yours for the first syllable. No, seriously, we have fine horses. Father and I ride, and Mother did. She had her accident out riding. She was

heading down to Fury, the creek beyond Candleway. You'll get used to all these names. Fury because the water there jumps five feet against the rocks and Candleway because the pines, firs, whatever they are, look like they're holding candles."

He had gotten up and was standing at the foot of the bed, pouring Burgos sherry out of a decanter from the sideboard, proffering her the glass and filling his own. "She'd gone out alone, she often did, although Father didn't approve. He was always after Lavinia to go with her for company, and because the path gets treacherous down near the creek, especially after the spring thaw. The water running down the hill rutting the ground, bringing roots to the surface. . . ."

"Darling, if you'd rather not talk about it—"

"It's all right, you're family, you're entitled to know. I'm not about to get dewy-eyed and lumpy in the throat, although God knows I loved her. Everybody did. You'd have been wild about her. Lavinia lived for her."

"Your aunt?"

"Mother's twin. Wait 'til you meet her. She looks like one sensuous bitch, skin as white as porcelain, full red lips, high cheekbones and eyes that can look right through you. She wears her hair long and straight and it's black as pitch, but she seems unaware of the impression she makes. How can I put it? I guess it's that she doesn't try to smoulder. Actually, she's fairly shy and reserved. Though once you know her, she's really sweet. She and Mother looked identical, same skin, hair, everything. But underneath they were different as night from day. Justine was so outgoing, vivacious, so incredibly human." He sighed painfully. "Thirty-nine years old and dead." He slammed the wall with his fist, rattling the decanters sitting in a row on the sideboard.

"You say she was out riding?"

"Yes, alone. A wind came up and down by the creek she apparently took a branch across the forehead. There was an ugly cut. The force of it knocked her off the

horse, and in falling, she struck her head on a root or rock. By the time we found her, got her home to bed and Dr. Craven up from town, she was too far gone."

Pausing, he drained his glass, prepared to refill it, then changed his mind, setting the bottle down and searching among the decanters.

"Damn, we're out of whiskey."

Sitting up, the sheet drawn tightly over her breasts revealing her nipples, she tapped the bed with her free hand. "Bother the whiskey, darling. Come, sit."

He did so, getting a rein on his emotions and continuing. "She died that night and Gray's heart died with her. He worshipped her. We all did, even the horned toad."

"The what?"

He smirked mischievously. "That's what Father and I call Grandfather, behind his back of course. If I ever said it to his face he'd split my skull with his cane!"

"That's mean, horned toad indeed!"

"You misunderstand, Red Queen, it's intended as a compliment. There's not a creature alive as tenacious, as tough, as determined as a Texas toad. That's our Cyrus, the ruggedest little man ever to draw breath. Five feet and ninety pounds of pure gristle wound about a steel spine and topped off with a mind of pure genius. In his day he could look at a stand of white oak and see through the leaves and bark to a six-masted schooner breasting the waves, tying the ports of the world together like a spider's web. Masts climbing the sky a hundred and twenty feet above a deck, scratching the bellies of the clouds. They claim that Cyrus Dandridge revolutionized the entire industry! They're right."

"And now your father's taken over."

Ross nodded.

"You should see your own eyes at this moment, my darling. You are your father's son."

"I suppose we're a lot alike."

"I shudder to think of the future."

His dark, handsome features tightened perceptibly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I picture me a builder's widow, shunted out of your affections by a ship, a stunning beauty like this one gliding about the seas, my name on her bow perhaps, but your love and devotion running through every beam and sail."

He nodded. "Of course, even beams and sails warming my bed. No, that can never happen, my darling. I love you too much to let it. Besides, I'd hardly name a ship after you to see it pass into somebody else's hands. That's a bit like lending you to a friend overnight!"

"Didn't you say your father named a ship after your mother?"

"Yes, our one and only attempt at shipping rather than simply shipbuilding. It didn't work out. The competition was a bit too fierce and it just wasn't our dish of tea. The *Justine* was a mistake all of us came to regret. Whenever Gray reads or hears about her, it drains him pale as a ghost. You can look in his eyes and see it stirring up all the old embers." He paused. "But we're getting off the subject, darling, weren't we talking about you warming my bed?"

Dropping his empty glass to the rug, his hand thrust forward ripping away the sheet wrapped about her; and he was down upon her. She squealed with delight, wriggling to free herself, arching her back to throw him off. But her movements rapidly became weaker, along with the urge to free herself. Surrendering, her arms locked tightly about him, she drew his lips down upon her mouth.

And the *Olympia* drove forward, pounding over the blue seas, whitening them, her wooden-eyed, bare-breasted maid of the thunderbolt dripping glistening lines of water, leading her homeward.

## II

Thursby was in his glory. Having taken charge of the household staff years ago he'd sworn that every one of his dinners must exceed the one preceding it in excellence and visual splendor. He glowed with satisfaction at sight of this one.

Seated mid-table, opposite Douglas Cranshaw, Gray's banker, whose three hundred pounds were severely testing one of the newly-acquired, high-backed Venetian-style chairs, Lavinia's gaze continued to drift past him to Thursby, standing at his station in the corner. She watched in amusement as his watery blue eyes darted from one guest to another, mutely approving of this guest's gesture, disapproving of that one.

King of the world's sticklers for perfection, she reflected. Fifteen guests—any odd number would not be to his liking—thirteen, a devil's dozen, would have sent him reeling from the room! He conducted the household like it was a High Mass performed by the Pope. Orderliness was unquestionably Mr. Neatly Done's most cherished trait.

Gray sat at the head of the table enjoying himself immensely, his dark eyes sparkling animatedly, his prematurely white-maned head bobbing acknowledgment to something murmured to him by wispy little Mrs. Harrington on his left.

Gray Dandridge, master of all he surveyed, *her* Gray. The thought brought a warm feeling to her. It didn't seem possible, but after all the empty years of patient waiting, watching him from afar, hungering for him, consumed with yearning for his love, after all this at long last she could actually claim him.

Now and then his hearty laugh rose above the con-

versation, eliciting a tolerant glance from her as their eyes met. And once, left to his meal by the guests on either side of him, he paused long enough to get her attention in order to fondly smile at her.

Had all the barren years, the years of denial spent clinging to the slender thread of hope been worth it? she asked herself. What a question! Of course they had, although as she looked back on them, it had scarcely appeared so at the time. To be sure, she had never even considered the possibility of winning his love and affection as long as Justine had been alive. No two people had been happier than Justine and Gray. Positively, enviously so.

And envious Lavinia had been. Until her sister's death, that is. Or at least until she had conquered Gray's heart.

She had been such a clever witch about that; she couldn't resist congratulating herself every time it came to mind. She had been so generously patient throughout the period of mourning, lavishing sympathy on him, cheering him up, soothing his bruised feelings. Then, when time began to ease his pain, she subtly altered her approach. Nature had made her Justine's equal in beauty, but about Lavinia there was an air of fleshly intemperance, a sort of bridled wantonness of which she skillfully affected ignorance.

Her campaign had begun with a gradual change in her wardrobe, the somber blacks and dark blues giving way to lighter, happier colors, although she continued to hold her black gowns in reserve for intimate occasions. As time went on, her neckline had inched downward to draw his eyes to her cleavage and her firm, high breasts. Her lips became fuller, more seductive, with the addition of crimson lip paint, and she let her shoulder-length hair grow until it hung down her back. Her eyes took on a feline quality, burning deep with desire for him. She even took pains to experiment with candlelight, where to set the sticks to show herself in the most alluring light possible. She turned and sat and arose and walked with



scrupulous attention to movement; there were many such subtle changes that, taken as one, altered her entirely over the months.

And just as she'd planned, Gray had taken notice, his eyes informing her. And less than two years after Justine's death, he had turned the look of love upon her twin.

Soon everything that was his would be hers. Out of the shadows she would step, out of the outside into the golden circle of Providence society and all the advantages the Dandridge name automatically conveyed. And Providence society, made up as it was of cackling, overdressed, overnourished, empty-headed hens and cocks, sorely needed her stewardship. Certainly there was no one better qualified to rule them, a social queen in diamonds and silks, arbiter of disputes, advisor, determiner of what was acceptable and what not, principal tastemaker, fawned upon and toadied to because she was Mrs. Dandridge Shipbuilding, quite possibly the wealthiest and most influential woman in the state, if not all New England!

But she deserved it, all of it, every smile of admiration, every deferential syllable. She had waited for the prize, worked for it and won it fairly, as fairly as any like it had ever been won.

She glanced down the table at Cyrus, seated at the opposite end. Dear Dandridge Senior, the tiny tyrant, sitting picking at his food, avoiding conversation, glowering at the candles as usual, looking for something to criticize or order changed. Oddly enough, she told herself that she neither liked nor disliked the horned toad. He was merely something to put up with for the next year, possibly two, at the most three. Intuitively she knew that any warm feelings that Cyrus might harbor for her would be held in check by his love for Justine and loyalty to her memory. It was nothing that she, Lavinia, had actually done to him to invite his displeasure. It was merely her presence where Justine should have been.

As if sensing her eyes on him, he looked up at her. She smiled, but he reacted not at all, instead looking back down again. His pinched features, the flesh, taken by age, tightening his face to his head, gave him a look of permanent displeasure, turning down the corners of his mouth, narrowing his black eyes.

Once more she consoled herself with the knowledge that whether Cyrus approved or not, she would soon be mistress of Blackwood. "With all my worldly goods I thee endow!" Gray was the only one who counted. This too-slow-to-die old man, with his grouchy looks, wandering mind, and the tongue and table manners of a common sailor, counted least of all.

Separating father from son were the Hallorans, the Cranshaws, Overstreet—he of the smelly pipe and habitually grimy fingernails and cow-eyed wife; the Slaters and Senator and Mrs. Evan Brockway, all on display under the magnificent Waterford chandelier, Lavinia's first purchase for the house as Mrs. Gray Dandridge to be.

The candles on the table glowed proudly, shadowing the sculptured oval ceiling, and the sounds of silver and crystal mingled with the conversation.

Sight of Tom Overstreet plodding in through the front door with his overweight wife, she overdressed as usual in some tasteless creation snatched from the window of Pritchard and Gamble's Millinery Shop, had turned Lavinia's stomach. But she was mindful of Overstreet's value to Gray and the firm. Lavinia managed to conceal her disgust and turn on her most radiant smile. Overstreet's infernal pipe—she'd love to snatch it out of his fat fingers and bury it under a rock.

The entree had arrived. Freshly killed, roasted Vermont pheasant was attacked and consumed, stripped to the slender bones, cooed over the while by the ladies, generously complimented upon by the gentlemen. And with it came heaping platters of fresh vegetables suitably sauced and seasoned under Thursby's critical eye.

In the meantime, a single topic of conversation had

seized the attention of everyone at the table, to Lavinia's annoyance.

"Doug," said Gray to Cranshaw, "I keep telling you she's a ship, not a boat. Boats are things with oars and dead fish lying about their bottoms."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," began Judge Harrington seated on Lavinia's right, "I'll confess to being fascinated by any talk of the *Liberty Belle*, but shouldn't we spare the ladies?"

"I couldn't agree more," said Gray. "Let's hold off until we get to the brandy and cigars in the library."

But to Lavinia's chagrin, the ladies protested loudly, all pleading to hear about the *Belle*.

"I can tell you this much, she's costing us a damned fortune," snapped Cyrus, riveting his son with his eyes, "practically every cent poured into one ship!"

"It's nothing like that, Father, and you know it," responded Gray. "Attention, one and all, we're about to get into the hundred-and-first round of the Dandridge family running squabble over the *Liberty Belle*."

"Bosh!"

"Tell us about her, Gray," said the Senator. "All we get down in Washington are rumors and outright lies."

"Tom Overstreet's in charge," said Gray. "Thomas, tell 'em what they want to know."

"Just don't tell 'em how much it's costing," growled Cyrus. "I don't want anybody's apoplexy on my conscience!"

"What are you worrying about?" asked Gray. "She's sold."

"She's sold and we're over budget! Where, may I ask, is the profit in that?"

"Three hundred and thirty-five feet long, fifty-five wide," began Overstreet, putting match to pipe bowl prompting Lavinia to look away to avoid grimacing. "The mainmast, one hundred and forty-one feet long, the mainyard a hundred twenty."

She adroitly stifled a yawn.

"My goodness!" exclaimed the Senator. "That's bigger than any clipper the Dandridge yards or anyone else has ever built before!"

Everyone's enthusiasm for the subject mounted quickly. Everyone seemed genuinely interested, save Lavinia. She'd never dream of admitting it to Gray, but she hadn't the slightest interest in ships or the building of them. Quite the contrary. Even boarding one at anchor inspired nausea, and the fact that he and Cyrus, Overstreet and all the other Dandridge underlings were enchanted by the smelly things and the building of them, in the manner of small boys overawed by new toys, was to her nothing more than proof of a truism she had subscribed to for years, the fact that no man ever really grows up.

She had heard the entire paean, or great boring chunks of it, so often she knew it by heart.

*"Thirty years of planning, thousands of figures jumbled together in my brain, Vinnie: the Westwind, the Justine, the Sea Sovereign, the Eagle, the Sea Empress and all the others flying about the world! To the West Coast, to the gold wrested from the mountains, dug and placer-mined and loaded aboard Dandridge-built ships. The yards humming day in, day out, the pounding and sawing, the drills biting, voices yelling, the spine-chilling song of hull scraping cradle. Tom Overstreet and all the other loyal boys, sleeves rolled up, plunging into the work. But never the prize without the cost. The Queen of the Main alone broke more records and lost more topmasts than any other ship afloat. Wind-ripped canvas screaming like a living thing, masts with their yards like multiple crucifixes tumbling, gear parting, sliced in two by the invisible sword of black bad luck!"*

*"But none of it can stop us, even slow the pace. For what God gives you you pay; and if you want the biggest, fastest clippers ever to fly you pay plenty, in sweat, in blood, in resources!"*

Like Cyrus before him Gray had built the fastest ships

on water. The *Liberty Belle* was to be the fastest ever, the fairest, the finest of all. Start him on the subject and watch the glaze slip over his eyes and his voice rise like a fanatic's exhorting his fellow true believers. He never tired of telling her of his recurring dream in which the sea singled him out and spoke to him:

*"Send out your biggest one, send forth the clipper to dwarf them all, Dandridge! Dream on it, draw it, build it, launch it, send it across my breast! Do it, for Cyrus, for yourself, for your son. Do it for all the men who dream and never see their dreams fulfilled. Do it!"*

And by God Almighty he would! Wasn't it 1850, the newest year of all? Dawn of a new era? High time the queen of all ships took to the seas!

"We launch day after tomorrow, noon sharp," he interposed quietly, "thanks to Tom and his crew. Gentlemen, a toast to Tom Overstreet!"

"Gray—" began Overstreet, lowering his eyes modestly.

"King of the yards!" boomed Gray, rising. "I salute you, Mr. Overstreet, sir. I drink to you!"

"Hear! Hear!" exclaimed the Senator lifting his glass and everyone, Cyrus included, rose to the toast.

The mousse followed, closing out talk of the *Liberty Belle* and the table was preparing to disband, the men to adjourn to the library, the ladies to the garden and the gazebo for tea and cookies and gossip. Lavinia was anticipating these after-dinner rituals when Gray suddenly rose a second time and began tapping his water glass with his spoon.

"Friends," he said, swinging his broad shoulders from one side to the other and back, "I have an announcement which will come as no surprise. It gives me great pleasure to announce that our charming hostess, Lavinia Cartwright, has consented to be my wife."

Thursby's jaw dropped like a sack of coins released over an open palm. But in the outburst of applause and female squeals of pleasure, the congratulatory hand-

shakes, back-patting and bussing that followed, his aplomb reappeared and Lavinia concluded that the news wasn't all that surprising to him. Excusing herself from the others, she approached him.

"Congratulations, Miss Lavinia."

"Thank you, Thursby."

"I do hope you'll be very happy."

"We're certain to be, as long as you're here to hold us all together."

"That's very generous of you."

"I mean it in all sincerity."

The other ladies began edging around them. "Have you set the date?" inquired Mrs. Brockway breathlessly, her lashes fluttering.

"The twelfth of next month," replied Lavinia. "We just this morning decided."

"How exciting!" boomed Mrs. Overstreet, her fat, wet lower lip quivering obscenely, prompting Lavinia to stifle a laugh. "A pity Ross isn't here to hear the good news!"

"Gray tried to get in touch with him in London, but he'd already left for home." Peering over Mrs. Overstreet's head, she caught sight of Gray's signal from the other side of the room. "Please excuse me a moment. I'll join you in the garden. Thursby, would you show the ladies outside and see to things?"

"With pleasure, madam."

She liked that. Turning, she crossed to Gray. Taking her by the arm, he kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"How did I do?" he inquired good-naturedly.

"You were splendid, my darling."

"Vinnie, dearest, keep them all outside at least until sundown, will you? There's a dear. We're going to lock ourselves in and talk about the *Belle*."

"You and your toy."

"My love, my second love."

"Don't be too long. I'm exhausted and you know how I loathe their senseless cackling. They're so very

sweet, every one, but their gossip bores me to distraction."

Staring at her he hadn't heard a word. "You're magnificent. I'm needles all over just looking at you. Would you mind if I stripped you with my eyes?"

"Gray, for heaven's sakes!" She blushed and smiled and watched him turn toward the library door through which the other men were already moving.

### III

The five slender ribbons that drew her peignoir about her body held him rapt as she moved slowly toward him. Reaching for the top ribbon, she loosened the knot with practiced ease, her eyes fastened to his. The other knots were undone in turn and like a cloud releasing her the garment slipped from her milk-white shoulders, crumpling in a heap around her feet.

Rising from his chair he enfolded her, his hands gliding down her back, pulling her gently but firmly to him.

"We should wait," she whispered huskily. "I know I'm going to feel guilty again."

"Vinnie, we're as good as man and wife already. Why fight it?"

"It's just that when you—I can't seem to control myself—"

She lowered her eyes. They moved in silence to the great wide walnut tester bed canopied in flower-patterned toile, she preceding him, leading him by the hand like a child. Leaning over, she drew back the antique spread of crocheted cotton. Her nightgown gaped, revealing the white mound of her breast, and the fragrance of her perfume fired his senses. She touched his cheek with her fingertips, her eyes betraying her desire for him.

"My darling, I love you so," she whispered. "You make me feel so beautiful inside."

"I adore you, Vinnie!"

They had made love before, and during the act she had pretended to abandon all control, clawing and biting him savagely, moaning, whispering "my darling, my darling" over and over again. But every movement on



her part, every sound, every reaction building to his climax had been purely sham.

It wasn't that he had been inadequate. It was simply that she had no intention of allowing herself to become devoted to him or any man, for that matter. Such a relationship in her view was tantamount to slavery. It made for security and a comfortable life, a life wherein one could be cared for, catered to and doted upon, but it was slavery nonetheless.

It had been easy to see that he had no suspicion that she was acting. Indeed, when they were done he seemed proud of himself, obviously taking it for granted that he had satisfied her completely. And it was all she could do to keep from laughing in his face when he had announced with a seriousness worthy of an archbishop: "That was beautiful, Vinnie, magnificent! We're made for each other!"

Once more they made love, *he* made love and she cooperated with all the competence and cunning at her command.

Done, and done complimenting each other, they dozed in each other's arms. The night grew older. The wind rose outside the window, spreading through the treetops. A thundercloud blackened the face of the moon and the sound of galloping came thundering up the hill. Louder and louder it grew, a mount ridden at full speed, hooves clattering over the gravel, the rider reining up under the window.

"Enos! Enos!" Someone was calling for Enos Pryne, the stableman. Fully awake and sitting up, Gray and she listened intently. Roused from his slumber, Enos Pryne came stumbling up from the stable cottage. Now Gray and Lavinia were out of bed, she drawing her peignoir about her nakedness, the two of them at the window staring down at the dimly-lit drama unfolding below.

"Who is that?" she asked anxiously.

He squinted through the darkness. "I can't make him out." He pushed the open windows wider, ignoring the chill rush of air, intent only on finding out what was happening. The rider had dismounted and was looking up at him, touching the peak of his cap deferentially, his face deeply troubled.

"It's Grady Marden, one of the nightwatchmen," said Gray anxiously.

Marden called up: "Mr. Dandridge, sir?"

"What is it, man!"

"The *Liberty Belle*, sir—she's on fire!"

"Good God!"

Fumbling about in the bureau drawer, she found matches and began lighting a candelabrum, her hand trembling; she brought the light to him while he pulled his trousers and boots on and flung a jacket over his shoulders. Leaning out the window, he called down to Enos, who stood helplessly alongside Marden.

"Saddle Pegasus!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get him, hurry!"

"Gray, do be careful."

"You heard him, Vinnie, it's the *Belle*!" Voicing the name a second time loosed his anger. At once he was a man possessed, furious, battling the shackles of his frustration. Again he called out the window to the waiting Marden.

"How bad?"

"Bad and getting worse, sir."

"Isn't anybody down there doing anything?"

"They're trying. They can't get close enough."

Vinnie's hands gripped Gray's shoulders. "You'll need a shirt, darling. You'll catch your death in this night air!"

Waving her away with uncharacteristic rudeness, he stomped his heels into his boots and cinched his belt, cursing under his breath. She held the shirt for him to take, then tossed it on the bed and tried to button his

jacket for him, but, wrenching free, he was out the door, bounding down the stairs.

The front door slammed behind him, and a moment later he and Marden were astride their horses and away. Soon the only sound was the plaintive moaning of the wind. Clutching her peignoir tightly about her, Vinnie leaned out the window looking left, then right, at the maples close to the front of the house, their nearest branches touching the roof.

"Mody," she called softly.

A black cat, his eyes gleaming, leaped from an upper branch to one well below it. Creeping agilely along it toward her, he hopped onto the windowsill. Gathering him in her arms, she closed the window, and, drawing the chair Gray had occupied earlier up to the bed, released the cat, permitting him to run across the covers. Finding a spot to his liking, scratching briefly and positioning himself, he stretched, yawned and eyed her inquisitively. Meanwhile she had moved to a corner of the room, to a cabriole table. Reaching underneath it, she brought out a key and unlocking the single drawer, took out a deck of tarot cards.

Smoothing the bedcovers without disturbing the cat, she sat and shuffled the cards, then began laying them out.

"Asmodeus." The cat raised his head and came to her, resettling himself between her arms as she studied the cards.

"Look at the cards. The Wheel. The cosmic rhythms of life and death, growth and decay ceaselessly ebbing and flowing. Feel the rhythms, Mody, my love, feel them in your limbs, in your throat." She touched the next card apprehensively after revealing it. The next card? "The Hanged Man—sacrifice, martyrdom, the 'death' of orgasm." Her breath hissed between clenched teeth. "Death, death, death, clear as crystal. But whose?" She paused. "Here we are. Change, transformation. Death but new life. Destruction and creation bound into

one. Mody, this sign, this night is the dark night of the soul. I sense it, the cards show it clearly.

"Look, the Moon. Grave danger. There's your death."

The cat pawed the Moon card, its tongue darting from its mouth.

She pushed him away gently. "No, you touch that card at your peril. Beware the Moon, we must; in it lie illusions and abominations springing from the deepest corridors of the mind. Forbidden dreams to all of them, Mody." She laughed. "But not to us, never to us, because we know." A new card? "Ah, the Suit of Pentacles, the King; a successful man, profit in business ventures, courage, a brilliant mind. Who might that be, my dearest?"

Again the cat's paw darted out, touching the King, twisting the card where it lay, almost but not quite reversing it.

"Stop that!" Pulling him back, she straightened the card. "Reverse it and you change it into wickedness grown old, into the horned toad!"

Another card. "There it is, the destruction of his ship. But there isn't enough light to see clearly. It's as if a black veil were flung over it. More cards, Wands and Swords, change and misfortune. What else? The death here is only the destructive force of the fire, the death of the ship. And change. Changing it all for him, the whole future. Changing it for us, Mody.

"And see here, the Six of Swords. A journey by water. That would be Ross returning home, bringing happiness. The Ace of Cups, where is it? Where are love and happiness? Now it's all becoming jumbled. Uncertainty and confusion!"

Down came the flat of her hand against the arrangement, startling the cat. Sweeping her hands wide, scattering the cards from one end of the bed to the other, she placed her fists against her temples and shook her head in defeat. And as if in response to an unspoken com-

mand, the cat swung about to face her. Gaining control, she lowered her arms slowly and picked him up.

"Handsome Mody. My Mody, come."

Leaving the room, quietly closing the door behind her, she padded down the long hallway to her own room off the far end on the left. Taking her cloak from the armoire standing just inside the door, she threw it over her shoulders and began climbing the metal spiral staircase twisting ceilingward at the end of the hallway. Passing the third and fourth floors, she ascended to the roof, opening the trap and emerging onto the narrow captain's walk on the east side of the house facing the sea.

The trees below groaned under the weight of the wind as she dropped Mody to run along the walk, and, as she clutched her cloak about her, she fastened the ties and lifted the hood over her head.

The spyglass was ice cold. Uncapping the lens, she peered through it, discovered the horizon and lowering the glass, brought the bridge approaching the shipyards into view. To the right, she found the *Belle*.

Flames were leaping into the rigging, as if shot straight upward from guns on deck, the fire catching the rope tar, sending towering flares into the blue-black sky. From bowsprit to helm the most magnificent set of spars ever to ladder the sky blazed upward. It was as if hell's furnace had been opened up in the earth's bowels to erupt and ascend into the night. She gasped aloud and Mody came running to her, curling his body about her ankles and purring loudly. Orange tongues licked at the slender spars, at masts and rope and as she stared in astonishment gradually merged into a single enormous conflagration. Stirrups loosened, lifts and ties and yokes gave way, down came the rigging crashing into the smoldering hull, turning it in seconds into a brazier of flame consuming kindled spars and yardarms, masts and booms like matchsticks.

She watched the blazing spectacle through the telescope as men raced back and forth in front of the burning ship, waving their arms helplessly. Suddenly Gray appeared, crossing the bridge, his horse's hooves soundlessly hammering the heavy wooden beams. She watched as he reined up, all but ripping the bit from the animal's mouth in his haste, flinging himself to the ground, oblivious of his jacket slipping from his shoulders. Swinging about, he ran straight for the holocaust, the flaming corpse of his ship.

"No!" she shouted.

A blazing spar crashed to the ground close by him and her heart leaped to her throat, pounding like a trip-hammer. In quick succession, two horse-drawn fire wagons came careening to a stop. Gray turned to helping the new arrivals and his own men with the lengths of hose, joining them, setting up the heavy two-man hand pumps on the bridge, dropping the suction hoses over the sides into the water.

"It's useless, it's too late!" she cried. "Can't you see? Don't be a fool! It's all over. Gray, Gray!"

One spray, speedily joined by a second, began playing upon the blazing hull. Gray began moving forward toward it. A hand reached out to grab his shoulder, but he eluded it. The hoses were not getting their water high enough; masts and spars and rigging twenty feet and more above the deck continued to blaze.

Now he had closed to within a few feet of the fire, but, concentrating on the hose he had snatched from a fireman, he failed to see a topmast break loose.

She screamed as down it plunged, like a fiery sword hurled from heaven. But instead of landing in the hull, the weight of its heavy end flipping over brought it down upon the near rail. Bouncing upright, it dropped over the rail, catching Gray full on the right shoulder, crushing him instantly. He lay still as stone as the others came rushing up, seizing the topmast, lifting it off him and bending over him. One man, kneeling beside Gray,

straightened up, shaking his head and making an ominous gesture to the others. The hose, having slipped from Gray's grasp as he was driven to the ground, was now snaking about out of control, shooting its water in every direction except at the doomed ship.

Without a murmur she raised her head, tilted the glass downward, recapped the lens, and, picking Mody up, retraced her steps down the spiral stairway, down the hallway to the master bedroom. Closing and locking the door behind her, she divested herself of her cloak, and, moving to the chair alongside the bed, picked it up, swung the chair high overhead and hurled it through the front window.

## IV

The newlyweds' voluntary confinement was not without interludes that invited ennui. On such occasions, when even interest in lovemaking palled, Lisa fell to questioning Ross about his boyhood at Blackwood, his father and grandfather and others in the household. Her curiosity was matched by her resolve to be as well prepared as possible for the meeting to come.

The *Olympia* was within hours of New York harbor when the sherry ran out. Yielding to impulse, they dressed and went out on deck. It was their first such foray by daylight, and it promptly canceled all wagers as to which would be first to appear.

They stood at the rail, taking the sun and playful breeze and watching a school of porpoises slip by, stitching the sea with their black bodies. Lisa confessed to finding Cyrus the most unusual and interesting of all the Dandridges, except, of course, Ross.

"He's lost a great deal of strength," said Ross, "but then he's past eighty and life hasn't been easy for him. His mind tends to wander now and then, like a dog slipping its collar, not straying far and always coming back. But still it's depressing seeing it."

"It's not uncommon at that age."

"If you had known him ten years ago, you'd take it for tragedy now."

The breeze stiffened, tearing the sea white in a hundred places, and the ship groaned like a prisoner on the rack as it drove through the water.

"Is he healthy otherwise?"

"Old-age aches and pains. His lungs give him trouble now and then, and his stomach. He's half-blind but he



refuses to wear glasses. He has a nurse, a middle-aged member of your gentle sex, with the disposition of a rusty rabbit trap. Nellie Hedridge; you'll love her. She hangs about him like the shadow of death. No newborn baby ever had better care. If he's thirty seconds late taking his medicine, she practically jams the spoon down his throat. It's really funny. He has this yellow stuff in a big brown bottle prescribed by Dr. Craven. She's supposed to dose him with it every four hours, but he insists on taking it himself. He's stubborn as a mule on that.

"The trouble is he never knows what time it is. He can't tolerate clocks, never owned a watch, so naturally if he's out on the lawn or up in his room he has no idea it's spoon time. Hedridge follows him around like a house detective in a cheap hotel, peering around corners, peeking through keyholes."

"I take it she lives at the house."

"Yes, much to Thursby's ire. Thursby runs the place and he and Hedridge get along like two wolves fighting over a chicken. Then there's Hedridge and the cook. When cook conjures up something the least bit spicy, nothing near as powerful as curry or one of the cook's Italian sauces, Hedridge goes berserk!"

"But your grandfather doesn't have to eat it if it's too hot for him."

"You don't understand. If it makes it to the table he's the first one to spot it and demand it. Hedridge'll blame the cook, the cook'll blame Thursby. Gray gets into the middle of it trying to mediate. Poor Gray."

"He sounds wonderful."

"He is, patient, good-hearted, totally genuine. As straight as a die, a rare quality among Yankee sharpsters. He and Mother were made for each other. Oh, he's no saint; he can be as stubborn as Cyrus and dead wrong and get his back up when he ought to have sense enough not to. You should hear the two of them go at it, over

money, mostly. Cyrus likes to hang onto it and Gray can throw it around like water if he's got his teeth into something he figures warrants heavy spending."

"Like the *Liberty Belle*."

"Like anything he really puts his heart into."

"He must miss your mother awfully."

"He did for months and months. I think the worst of the hurt is gone now, worn away. He loved her so, not just because of what she was, but what she did for him. She could see that Dandridge Shipbuilding was his whole life, so she contented herself living and loving him on his terms, according to his schedule, I guess you'd have to say. When he was away from work he belonged to her, but when he was up to his elbows in it at the yards or at home, bickering with Cyrus or bringing Tom Overstreet or other people to the house to wrestle with problems, she stayed in the background."

"She knew her place," she said evenly.

He studied her archly. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"You seem to be, you make her sound a first-class martyr."

"I suppose from a woman's point of view she was, sort of."

"From anyone's point of view, anyone with sensitivity enough to see."

Turning from sight of the sea he took her in his arms and kissed her affectionately. "And you, Mrs. Dandridge, don't want to be martyred to the business, is that it?"

"I don't think I could be as generous as she was. It's too rare a quality. I want you for my husband, Ross, not just my lover, not just our bodies together. You know what I mean."

"You don't want what's left of this Dandridge after the business has worked him over."

"I expect you think I'm being very selfish."

"Not at all. You have every right to demand your husband behave like a husband."

"I'm not demanding."

"What can I say, Lisa? I'm my father's son. He needs me, just as Cyrus needed him. Just as I shall need our sons. Lisa, that's the difference between running a haberdashery and the biggest, most successful shipbuilding firm on the continent. It's the degree of commitment, of sacrifice."

"It sounds like it's all sacrifice, as if that's all there's room for. Why did you marry me, Ross, to have a hand on your arm at dinner parties? To show Providence and the world that you intend to carry on the line?"

"Lisa—"

"Let's drop it, before we begin sniping at each other."

"We don't have to stoop to that, let's discuss it."

"I don't think we can. To be honest about it, it's hit me too suddenly. If we talk about it anymore now we'll end up arguing. I can't abide pointless argument, I saw too much of it with my father and mother. Let's just leave it at this: you asked me to be your wife, to have and to hold and all the other meaningful words. I consented, gladly. I'm pleased and happy and proud to be Mrs. Ross Dandridge."

"Darling, forget what I said about sacrifice."

"Forget it? How can I, when it's a bright red flag unfurled over the dome of Dandridge Shipbuilding?"

"Gray runs the business, lock, stock and barrel. He oversees every blessed thing, with Cyrus chipping in his two cents' worth, to be sure. I'll just be an ordinary time-clock pusher."

"Oh, Ross, you're so bright. How can you be so blind? Darling, you will be Gray, you have to be, don't you understand? He's not going to live forever. It goes from Cyrus to him to you, like passing the plate in church." He shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "Running anything as big and as complicated as Dandridge Shipbuilding has to be much more than a full-time job. It's like taking the veil, or whatever monks take. Which

brings us back to sacrifice. Sooner or later I'm to be the sacrificial lamb, along with our children. If we have any, that is."

"Don't say that!" His voice suddenly granite hard just as quickly softened. Seizing her by the shoulders he studied her eyes.

Her voice mellowed and she captured his eyes with her own. "But, darling, I'm serious. However you rationalize it, I have no intention of competing with saws, hammers and drills!"

"Lisa, you knew all this before I proposed, before you accepted. You went into it with your eyes open. Did you plan on working some miraculous change in things? Forget it, love, neither of us can change a thing! Although you might try changing your attitude!"

"Keep talking, Ross, I'm beginning to see you for the first time!"

"My eyes aren't exactly closed!"

"Is that so, and what do you think of what you see?"

"I think I know more about you than I did before, and very little I like, my Red Queen."

"Get it off your chest, darling, I'm all ears!"

"What was it you said the other day about all the men you'd had? Or had you? Which do you prefer?"

"Having them, naturally." Her jaw tightened, her eyes brimming with fury. "Somehow I knew we'd get back around to that."

"My purebred bride."

"Cows are purebred, darling, not brides."

"The Virgin Red Queen."

"Oh, do come off it, you're making me seasick!"

"Proud of yourself, aren't you? Aren't you!"

She lowered her voice. "I'm beginning to feel eyes on the back of my head. Would it make any sense to step back inside and continue this lovely tête-à-tête in privacy?"

"I don't give a good goddam if the whole world hears it!"

"A little louder and it will. It so happens I do give a good goddam!"

Whirling about, she marched into the cabin, slamming the door. Jerking it wide, he followed her in, slamming it a second time.

"Good afternoon, my lord." She curtseyed mockingly.

"Have you come to visit your whore?"

His face already flushed began to crimson. Grabbing her by the wrists he pulled her close, inches separating their eyes.

"If you ever call yourself a whore to me again I shall beat you so you can't stand!"

"You jealous bastard! You absurd innocent! You lay a hand on me and I shall make you wish you'd never set foot on England! God knows I'm beginning to wish I'd never set foot off it!"

"Do you deny you've slept with other men?"

"Fornicated for them, isn't that what you mean by slept with? Isn't that the word in your black little mind?"

"Don't talk like that. Dandridge women do not talk like gutter trash, do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. And to answer your question, darling, of course I've slept with other men. Dozens, scores, possibly a hundred and fifty or more. How else could I become as capable as you claim I am? Now, I'm sorry, I'm so ashamed. It does seem unfortunate, considering I was your very first conquest. I destroyed your precious virginity, nasty bitch that I am." One hand splayed across her breastbone, she batted her lashes.

"Very funny!"

"You're very pitiful. Spoiled rotten, much more than I thought you were! But since we're counting, darling, tell me how many slatterns have you bedded down while sowing your wild oats? I mean besides the sweet child whose fiancé came after you with a pistol? How many, Ross, sixty, six hundred?"

"That's different and you know it. A man—"

"A man can run amok while his wife-to-be sits by

the window waiting for him to tire, waiting for him to become bored and decide it's time to settle down to marriage and the family." She narrowed her eyes at him and her words came measured and needle sharp. "Wait a moment, did I hear you correctly? Did you call yourself a man? That's funny itself, positively hilarious!"

"I don't recall you expressing any doubt when I've had you on the bottom!"

"What you mean is when I had you on top, little boy. When I so charitably allowed you to fumble your way to climax!"

"Lisa!"

"Oh, shut up and leave me alone! There's a tot of rum left, why don't you crawl inside the decanter while I go for a walk on deck. The air in this lovely boudoir has suddenly become a bit too stale for me."

"Lisa—"

"Oh, before I leave wouldn't you like to thrash me, teach me a lesson? Put me in my place, my lord?"

"I'm sorry I said that, I'm sorry for everything I said."

"Please, spare me." She sat down on the end of the bed, her hand to her heart. "I don't know if my system can take the shock of an apology."

"I do apologize. Oh, Christ Jesus!" He slumped into a chair. They sat in silence staring at one another, then she got up and started for the door.

"Don't go," he said, "I don't want you to, please."

"I'm going for a stroll around the deck. I promise I shan't walk off the ship and home. And I shan't give my body to a sailor in the companionway, certainly not before dinner."

"I said I apologize!"

"I heard. It's a good word, very popular, very convenient. The one who says it feels he's making a huge sacrifice in terms of principle or something. Unfortunately, the one it's said to very often feels it's something less than adequate to the occasion."

"Do you love me?"

At the door, her hand on the latch, she turned and looked at him, her eyes softening. "I really don't mind your insults, Ross. We each of us seem able to give as good as we get with nasty words. We had to have our first fight sooner or later, why not now? It's a perfectly lovely day for releasing pent-up emotions. Yes, I do love you. That's the trouble, don't you see?"

"Trouble?"

"If I didn't, I'd get off this ship in New York and right back on another heading home." Pausing, she tittered. "Which might even be a Dandridge ship, since evidently your family's built practically everything that floats. I love you, but I don't love your shipbuilding and I have no desire to learn to. And when the time comes to choose between me and the business and you choose this." She spread her arms, taking in the ship. "Then farewell, lover, and best of luck."

## V

The *Olympia* continued flinging endless banners of foam from her bow as she neared the New World, the spray breaking as far back as her gangway. But in spite of her speed and the relentless strain upon masts, spars and the canvas and halyards dressing them, no mishaps occurred. For all the easterly's arrogance and bluster, for all the vessel's creaking and shuddering she seemed as determined as those guiding her to close the remaining distance to New York in near record time.

In something close to record time also Mr. and Mrs. Dandridge made peace and were reconciled behind closed door and portholes discreetly curtained.

The semi-darkness of the little cabin lent a mood of forbidden play to their lovemaking. He kissed her lingeringly, her hair, her eyes, her mouth, the fire of her anger replaced by a languid look of surrender. They began disrobing each other, their breaths coming faster until they faced each other completely naked. Closing in embrace, they lowered slowly to the bed, her slender, beautifully-contoured body trembling beneath his gentle hands as he began exploring, caressing her throat, reaching her breasts, fondling them and finding them with his warm mouth.

She adored him so! The act itself was like a pool in which she willingly submerged herself, delighting in it, drowning in it . . . Down, down, down his hand wandered, igniting her thighs, his finger entering, seeking and finding the heart of her sexual desire, stroking it, setting it tingling, throbbing into erection. Her heart pounded; soon now her body would be one with his, enveloping and engorging him, and they would begin again the glorious ascent, the dizzying upward spiral to the heights.



They were well practiced now, each tuned to the other's sensitivities, familiar with the secret haunts where pleasures patiently awaited release, each able to anticipate the other's responses, their interplay a model of perfection.

In the rapture of submission that followed, she vowed that no power on earth would ever take him from her, nothing ever come between them, least of all ships and traditions. If ever two human beings were born to love for life they were here, these two, locked in embrace.

The *Olympia* raised Montauk and ran along the coast of Long Island until the neglected, wind-lashed tenelements of Brooklyn came marching into view in gray array, joining the warehouses perched high above the black, debris-littered water.

Other vessels passing back and forth through the Narrows appeared, tri-masted barkentines—not nearly as sleek as clippers—carrying heavier cargoes at slower speeds. One passed heading seaward, the *Joshua Mercer*, three hands clinging to her foremast yardarm, loosening her canvas. Packets and sloops, schooners and a brig cluttered the lower bay, patching the bright blue afternoon sky a pristine white. Bells sounded a dissonant tune over the water and friends hailed one another as they passed.

Under the silent guns of Fort Hamilton and Fort Wadsworth rode the *Olympia*, while her crew scurried aloft to furl her royals and skysails. Sail by sail, her canvas was all but completely snugged by the time she had slipped through the traffic in the Narrows and gained the upper bay.

The view of the city and its sprawling ranks of boringly similar wooden buildings, broken only by an occasional green patch crowded with trees, continued until they reached Buttermilk Channel and the East River.

The double line of wharves, separated by the slender, unimpressive aspect of Welfare Island, extended as far as the eye could see, a forest of rope-bound masts probing

the air and collecting throngs of sea birds. Ships flying the flags of fifty nations bobbed in their slips while long-shoremen scurried about loading and unloading cargo. Passengers too were embarking and debarking, an over-aged, travel-weary schooner taking on people threading single file up its narrow gangplank.

New York! To Lisa seeing it for the first time it was a far cry from the dingy little harbor at Mizen Head. The whole panorama of buildings, ships, people, sights and sounds and smells, the bustle of commerce, the endless myriad movement, the sprawl of the city casting its shadow over the dockside thrilled and delighted her as she stood arm in arm with Ross at the rail.

The ship docked, the gangplank was dropped and set and the *Olympia's* only two passengers continued to stand at the rail waiting for their heavy luggage to be brought up from the hold.

A heavy-set young man in a neatly-tailored worsted suit, with a derby pulled down to his eyes against a mischievous breeze, a briefcase in one hand, an umbrella in the other, waved the latter high.

"Mr. Dandridge, sir, I'm Hennessey from Baldwin & Baldwin, the owners. Mr. Cruikshank sent me down to see to your things."

"Everything should be up here shortly."

"Sir, there's a gentleman waiting for you in the port office." Again the umbrella came up, the ferrule pointing to a flight of rickety-looking wooden stairs rising to a small building at the top. "You can go right up if you will, sir. I'll check your baggage through and get it out to the carriage stop. I'll wait there for you. It's just behind number eighteen. Will you be going to a hotel?"

"To the train station. We're going to Providence."

"Yes, sir."

"It's Gray come down to welcome us," said Ross, patting her arm. "Come."

She hesitated. "How is he on surprises?"

Ross laughed, she shrugged resignedly and together they started down the gangplank. Crossing the dock and climbing the steps to the office they entered.

The interior was smaller than she had imagined from the outside and made even more so by the ceiling-high stack of file cabinets and the stove occupying the center of the floor. A balding, green-visored clerk in banded shirtsleeves sat on a tall stool behind a sloping work table. Getting up at sight of them, he thrust his arms into his jacket, which had been hanging on a peg, and walked past nodding and exiting.

A second, older man sat in the corner enjoying a well-worn pipe.

"Tom!" Ross rushed forward to grasp Overstreet's hand, pumping it vigorously.

"Ross, Ross—" Overstreet was on his feet, taking firm hold of his shoulders, looking him up and down. "Two whole years, it doesn't seem possible!"

"Tom, let me introduce my wife. Lisa, this is Tom Overstreet, the man who makes Dandridge Shipbuilding the biggest and the best!"

Overstreet's ruddy face collapsed in astonishment. "Delighted to meet you, ma'am."

"Lisa, please," prompted Ross, "get that surprised look off your face." He kissed her on the cheek, then turned to Overstreet. "I know you expected me to fetch home a painting or sculpture, but this magnificent specimen represents the most beautiful work of art I could find. The price is well beyond my means, of course, but she assures me that there's no question she'll appreciate in value over the years. Tell him, darling."

"You're doing nobly. All I'd like to know is which wall am I to hang on?"

"How are Gray and Grandfather, Tom? Still at each other's throats? What's Aunt Lavinia up to? What's happening at the yards?"

"Sit down, Ross, Lisa." Overstreet straightened chairs

for them. Glancing at the floor, he shifted his weight uneasily. "There's been a fire." Pausing, he tapped the bowl of his pipe into his palm. "The *Belle*."

"How bad?"

"As bad as you can imagine. She was completely destroyed."

"Good God!"

Overstreet emptied his ashes into the coal scuttle and wiped his hand on his trouser leg. Taking out his reamer, he began to scrape the pipe bowl, avoiding Ross's eyes as he continued:

"All that's left is a hulk as black as pitch. Masts, decks, everything gone." He sighed heavily. "But, I'm afraid that's not the worst of it. Your father's dead, Ross, killed. It was an accident."

Lisa gasped, gripping his arm and holding tightly. "Oh, darling—"

As if struck by some invisible force, Ross froze. When he spoke, his words were toneless, his eyes blank.

"How did it happen?"

Overstreet explained in detail.

"You say he died instantly?"

"That's what everybody there says. I didn't get there myself until a few minutes after."

"Then he never felt any pain."

"Just the impact." Overstreet snapped his fingers. "They called a doctor, but—they took him downtown to Bayard Brothers Funeral Parlor."

"How'd the fire start?"

The older man finished reaming and cleaning his pipe and turned to refilling it from a well-worn pouch. "We can't say for sure, but putting two and two together, well, do you remember the watchman's shack just inside the gate on the right?" Ross nodded. "It hadn't been used for some time, not since the new gate was installed and the new shack with it on the opposite side. The old one was scheduled to be torn down for kindling but with the workload as heavy as it's been and one thing

and another, Bert Ivy and his maintenance people hadn't gotten around to it."

"Tom." Ross gestured for him to get on with it. He nodded and lit up.

"We figure the fire came from sparks from the stove in that old shack."

"You just said—"

"It hadn't been used, I know. Not by us, but it was a chilly night and Grady and the others think a drifter, maybe more than one must have climbed the fence, gotten into the shack and started a fire in the stove to keep warm. There wasn't any kindling around and the only coal was scattered about the floor. But there was a stack of old newspapers and he probably crammed them into the stove to get it red hot so that the coal would catch. You know how paper burns, big pieces of it can rise up the open flue and once outside, the wind must have got hold of 'em and carried 'em over to the *Belle*. All that fresh tar on her. . ."

"Go on."

"They say folks saw the blaze far away as Brockton to the north and Westerly south."

"I'm not interested in that. What about your damn-fool watchmen, sleeping as usual?"

"Nobody was sleeping, Ross. I've checked, I can give you my solemn word on that."

"How come somebody wasn't posted in the new shack across from the old one?"

"Not after work, son. Nobody goes in or out of that gate after closing time. You know that."

"I know one thing. He's dead and somebody killed him. We're going to find who and see him hanged!"

"Please, I know you're upset."

"Upset?" Eyes blazing, he jumped to his feet and began pacing, his heavy step rattling the windows of the little shack. "What about those drifters, didn't anybody see anything?"

"I've told you, that's just calculated guesswork. It

seems logical, particularly because there was half-burned paper in the stove and nobody seems to know how it got there."

Ross stopped pacing and turned toward the salt-stained window looking out at the *Olympia* taking the warmth of the afternoon sun on her shining decks. "When is the funeral?"

"Come and gone. The fire was nearly a week ago. Gray was buried the day after. Your grandfather wanted it that way."

"How's he taking it?"

"I'm not sure. Thursby seems to think pretty well, but your aunt says badly. That's something else. Your Aunt Lavinia and your father were planning to get married."

"That's no surprise."

"The twelfth of next month."

"How's she doing?"

"Who can say? She stays by herself in her room most of the time, and takes long walks through the woods nights. I've only seen her once since it happened, at the funeral. She looked like—she looked poorly."

"What's left of the yards?"

"Close to two-thirds was untouched."

"Marvelous!" he exclaimed bitterly.

"We're insured, Ross."

"The *Belle* wasn't, not completely. You know as well as I you can't get anything but construction insurance on a ship that hasn't been turned over to her owners yet."

"There's some coverage."

"Some."

"I don't know how much; Burton Phillips was still talking to the insurance people when I left to come down here."

"Tom, I hate to sound pessimistic, but it looks to me like this particular Dandridge family is out of the ship-building business."

"You're wrong, son. We have three other craft in various stages of construction, two already sold. One, matter

of fact, to Baldwin & Baldwin." He pointed his pipe out the window at the *Olympia*. "The fire never got near any of the three. No sir, Dandridge Shipbuilding may be scarred and hurting a bit, but she'll be all right. And she'll be turning out beauties like old *Ollie* out there for a long time to come."

"Without Gray?"

"With you in charge."

"And what do I know about building clippers?"

"What can't I teach you?"

"We'll see." He turned to Lisa. "Well, I've certainly brought you home to a joyful situation, haven't I?" His arm went about her waist and he drew her close.

"I'm so sorry, Ross. I wish there was something I could say to help." She paused. "Maybe there is." Turning and taking his face between her hands, she kissed him. "You, Mr. Dandridge, are going to have to go to work, you and I together, with Tom here and everybody else. We're going to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and pitch in! This is our chance to show the whole world what we Dandridges are made of!"

He stared. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"I do."

"You're something very special, ma'am. I'm beginning to see what the Allworths are made of."

He kissed her. Tom Overstreet made a fist, held it high and beamed.

"Welcome home!"

## VI

Through the black maples under a cloud-shrouded sky, obscuring stars and moon, Lavinia made her way down the pathway, Mody tagging at her heels, now and then lagging behind, his attention drawn to a night-roaming squirrel or chipmunk.

It was nearly midnight and she had come more than a mile from the house, heading in a southwesterly direction into the deep woods. Presently the maples, for which Blackwood had been named, gave way to oaks, the heavy-limbed ancients of the forest, surrounded by tall grasses and set well apart one from another as if each were seeking privacy from its similars. Beyond the oaks a small, almost perfectly round field beckoned, its grasses sparser and shorter than those surrounding the trees, and well trampled.

People wearing gray and black cloaks, hoods pulled over their heads, stood about in twos and threes, conversing in low voices.

"Hurry, Mody."

The sabat. She made her way past the last of the oaks into the open area. No sooner had she reached the clearing than He appeared directly opposite. At sight of Him the low, muddled conversation ceased and the company turned. From within the folds of their cloaks, black candles were produced and lit, the flame passing from candle to candle until the field became dotted with small blue lights.

They formed a semicircle before Him as He stood at the edge of the woodland, His muscular arms up-raised. He presented the face of a goat, an inverted triangular mask with horns twisting upward from the top of it. Burning eyes surveyed the gathering and from



beneath the mask a sharply pointed black beard protruded, matching His high-ribbed nose.

His limbs were covered with coarse black hair, His hands claws, His feet cloven hooves. He emitted the unmistakable odor of sulphur, the fumes rising in thin wisps from His shoulders.

"Homage!" exclaimed a voice behind Lavinia. "Homage to Ledion, to our lord and master!"

Stepping up on a stump, He turned slowly, bringing His broad, hairless back into view, His tail swinging back and forth. The company lined up in single file and, candles held high, approached Him one by one, bending to kiss His backside, Lavinia the next-to-last in line, bringing her lips to the hard blue-black flesh, kissing it, the thrill of its icy touch permeating her body.

"Chanto-coth, chanto-coth!"

Music—strings, a pipe, and horn—struck up a tune. Quickly forming a circle the group joined hands and began dancing, treading slowly to the left, pausing, turning, continuing to circle. Stepping down from the stump, He looked on, His mask concealing His reaction until He began waving His arms in time with the music. 'Round and 'round went the circle, breaking, reforming, continuing, moving always to the left. Gradually the music began increasing in tempo, becoming louder, more strident, the trio joined by an improvised drum, a heavy stick thumping steadily against a hollow log lying on the ground at the edge of the clearing.

The circle of small blue lights appeared like a pin-wheel spinning slowly at first, then faster and faster.

"Ledion, Ledion," whispered Lavinia. "Ledion!" Louder, louder, until other voices joined in the chant. "Ledion, Ledion, Ledion. . . ."

Again raising His arms, He addressed them, His voice deep, echoing, as if coming from a distance: "Xorguinae and bruxae, incubi and succubi, jetsoth, torma, ferriol!"

They came, stepping from behind the surrounding trees, materializing out of the darkness, joining the circle,

welcomed into it, separating the black- and gray-cloaked figures. These were the demons, the loathsome, detestable deities of the damned; creatures to contrive and clutter nightmares, to nauseate and revolt the innocent, the uninitiated.

Green-skinned, webbed hands and feet, covered with slime, dripping slime, drooling slime from between needle teeth. Bulbous eyes darting about wickedly, scales rising from its head and running a line down its spine. Another, its loathsome blue head buried in its neck, its face all but hidden by folds of flesh, one eye blind, slate-gray, the socket flesh torn above and below it, its other eye blood red, hairless arms and legs, the trunk of its body studded with pustules oozing liquid, a hissing sound issuing from its throat. A stunted demon, its body rotund, its loosely-fitting skin black speckled white, folds of it as wide as its chest hanging one below another down to its grotesque organs. Standing erect it was able to touch the ground with its paws ape-like. A griffon, four-legged, its beak curving to its chin, flapping its membranous wings ominously. A zanoth, horn-faced, hideous, its body smeared with a black, bilelike substance, its tongue flicking from its mouth like a snake.

Now the circle broke, the cloaked and demon dancers abandoning the simple, repetitious movements to begin twisting and writhing in fantastic figures. The music grew louder, the log drum pounding, wilder and wilder, the company seized by a frenzy, candles dropped or driven into the ground to stand and burn, cloaks ripped off revealing naked bodies, arms reaching out for the demons, vulgar play, gestures, movements, touching, fondling mouths and members. Intercourse standing, writhing, rolling about the ground; delighted squeals, shrieking, the music louder—louder!

He watched with his fire eyes, His member like a steel wedge permanently erect, one hand flashing out, snatching the hand of a wild-looking young witch, pulling her to Him, rushing her into the cover of the woods. Down

upon her, He drove His member into her, roaring laughter as they copulated in rhythm to the pounding log drum.

By the time He was done with her the dance had reduced itself to a loathsome spectacle. Now, He led the other witches, one by one, into the darkness and when Lavinia's turn came she went willingly, eagerly. Out of sight of the gathering He selected a spot under a tree and, easing her to the ground mounted her at once, inserting His member between her thighs. The suddenness of entry and the icy-coldness of his organ brought momentary pain, but it vanished and when their copulation began she surrendered completely, moaning in ecstasy, driving her hips upward, digging her nails into the cold, leathery skin of His back and covering His unmasked face with her kisses.

Harder and harder His member grew, driving her to the pinnacle. Their simultaneous orgasm happened three times, until at last He slowed His movements and withdrew, the last of His semen dripping upon her naked flesh like frozen fingertips touching one after another.

Arising and making her way back to the clearing, she retrieved her cloak to cover her nakedness against the chill air and, searching about, found her candle snuffed out by the wind in her absence.

Mody came mewing to her, rubbing his side against her leg affectionately. Picking him up, she stroked his head and stood waiting with the others for Him to finish copulating with the last of the coven. Soon He reappeared with His mask restored and resumed His place upon the stump.

"We shall meet again in sabat seven nights from tonight. With xorguinae and bruxae, all our demons, all our familiars." He cautioned them to guard against the curious, reminding them of the need for absolute secrecy, and urged them to keep up their quest for candidates. He invoked the names of the great unholy—each echoed in turn by the assembly—gripped His cloak, pulled it up to conceal the upper part of His body, released it and

was gone. And His demons with Him. The witches and warlocks began chanting softly as they drifted apart. A woman walking with an exaggerated forward tilt, her elbows protruding, her hood all but concealing her bloodless birdlike features, came over to Lavinia. Her eyes captured the light of a nearby candle, eyes steeped with sadness and sympathy. She touched her arm.

"I heard of your misfortune, dear. I'm so sorry."

"Hello, Erica."

"Didn't you see it in the cards?"

Gathering Mody up, Lavinia explained that she had seen destruction and danger. "Signifying the fire, of course."

"No Nine of Swords? Nor the Hanged Man trumping?"

"The Hanged Man, yes. There was death, I saw that, but I didn't associate it with him. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"I don't understand. You must have seen he was going to be killed, anyone could read. . . ."

The woman's persistence was beginning to annoy her. "What's the point in belaboring it?" she asked heatedly. "There's nothing I could have done."

"You could have summoned our Master."

"It was too late for that. Besides, what makes you think He'd want to save him?"

"A favor to you, naturally. He's very fond of you, dear. He likes the younger ones."

"I'm not young, Erica; I'm middle-aged and feeling older by the hour." She stroked Mody's head, staring down at him, her thoughts going back over the events of that fateful night. They began walking in the direction of the house.

"I *am* sorry, dear. You wanted to marry him for so long—"

"It wasn't meant to be."

"You still can, you know," Lavinia stopped short, prompting the other woman walking ahead of her to

stop and turn. "We can marry the newly dead. You remember John Settle, the warlock?"

"Vaguely. What about him?"

"Think back, Lavinia. He's about fifty-four or -five, medium height, very thin, painfully thin, deepset dark eyes, the skin on his face mottled. He's a doctor. He moved his practice to Westerly about five years ago."

They had resumed walking, Lavinia following her companion through the oaks to the edge of the maples and the path twisting through them. "What are you trying to say, Erica?"

"Listen to me, what he did you can do. Years ago he was in love with a girl and the very night before their wedding day she was killed, struck by lightning. He was desolate, so they say, completely crushed. Ledion took pity on him. The night after her funeral He married them by her grave. It was a spiritual pact. Ledion put them into communication and they've been in touch ever since. Settle hypnotizes himself and is conveyed into the other world."

"Astral projection—"

"Quite like it, yes. To this day they're as married as any couple you know. They speak to each other, they share the same house, they even have intercourse. Don't you see, Ledion could do the same thing for you?"

"Why bother?"

"But you loved him, didn't you? You were going to marry—"

Lavinia broke a twig off a maple and held it up before Erica's face. "This, my dear, was what I set my cap for, as the saying goes. Blackwood and everything that comes with it, all the wealth, the influence. A world of my own."

"You didn't love him?"

"You sound shocked. Why would I love him? What possible value can one place on love? There's so much else, so much of substance."

"I'll bet. And how wealthy are the Dandridges?"

"Brace yourself, dear. Roughly speaking, they own

about half of everything for miles around in all directions. A good share of the land from one end of the state to the other. Everything the old man makes on the yards, he invests in real estate, leaving just enough profit to keep the shipbuilding going. And what they don't own outright he holds options on. Millions, dear, and you know very well millions make millions. If that yard closed down tomorrow forever, their fortune would keep on growing from now till doomsday!"

"I never realized—"

"Few people do. It would have been all ours, his and mine."

"You're forgetting Ross."

"He'd get his share." She laughed mirthlessly. "There's more than enough to go around. But Gray and I would have controlled it." She sighed and shook her head. "It's not the money I regret losing, it's everything it stood for, influence and power second to none in the state. Tell me, what earthly good would my marrying him now do me on that score?"

"I do believe you're bitter."

"I'm so bitter I could kill the next six people I meet!"

"There's another way—"

"What do you propose I do, seduce Cyrus?"

"I wasn't thinking of him, I was thinking of Ross."

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm twice his age."

"How old is he?"

"Going on twenty-four." She smiled ruefully. "And the image of his father. A fine boy, a lovely boy."

"Twenty-four's not a boy, Lavinia. You could make him fall in love with you. You have the power. You're beautiful and you're still young, no matter what you say."

Her response was a brittle laugh. The idea was absurd, asinine!

"It wouldn't be the first time a young man fell in love with an older woman. Think about it. What could his father have given you that he can't?"

"You're talking utter, absolute nonsense!"

"Not so nonsensical that you're not thinking about it, though," said Erica with a sly look. "Look into Mody's eyes and see your own."

"Erica—"

"Mistress of Blackwood, that's what you'd be, with a young and handsome husband, the envy of every woman in Providence!"

"Let's get off the subject, shall we?"

"It would be your last chance. Don't be a fool, Lavinia, take it! Before some sly little minx comes along and steals his heart. Not to mention Blackwood, the ship business and the rest of it. Who knows, maybe one of the girls in Providence has her eye on him already."

"You have a fertile imagination."

"I'm being practical. If he's half the man his father was, he'll appreciate a real woman. Answer me this, what have you got to lose?"

"Please."

"Where is he now, still in Europe?"

"He's coming home tonight or tomorrow."

Having quickly warmed to the idea, Erica persisted, bound and determined to prove the validity of it. Everything regarding Ross volunteered by Lavinia, or wrung from her by the other woman's insistent questioning served to bolster her argument. And by the time they came within sight of the stables and parted company and Lavinia, with Mody leading the way, started for the darkened house she had seized upon the idea despite herself and had begun mulling it over. Once she gave serious thought to it, however, it took very little time for her to decide against it.

A pity, she mused. It was intriguing.

## VII

It was late afternoon by the time their baggage was returned, and they decided that instead of continuing on to Providence, all three should stay overnight in the city. They took rooms at the Astor House and dined that evening at Sherry's, catching a train the following morning.

The sky was swollen with clouds, and the wind was up. Three hours out of New York, just beyond New Haven, it began to rain. Soon the storm roused itself to full fury, beating against the car windows, obscuring view of the passing landscape. Lightning fractured the sky, and thunder rumbled overhead in concert with the roar and whistling of the locomotive and the clacking of wheels.

It was still raining sheets when they drew into Providence, and as she exited the rambling, newly built station, Lisa was greeted by sight of Brown College,\* its red-brick buildings scattered over the hill to the north.

They engaged a carriage and started out, dropping Tom off at his home on Harris Avenue and continuing on into the hinterlands in the direction of Blackwood. Despite a fair night's sleep, Lisa appeared tired and Ross voiced his concern when he caught her stifling a yawn.

"I guess I am a bit wrung out. Just nerves."

"I keep telling you, darling, there's nothing to worry about."

"I wish they knew what they were in for. You could have sent word on ahead."

"And spoil our surprise?"

"It may turn out more of a shock."

*\*In 1850 Brown was yet to become a university.*



"Nonsense, you'll be bringing warmth and sunshine into the dreary old place; they'll welcome you with open arms."

"Your grandfather, too?"

"Especially my grandfather!"

They had reached the woodland now, the road narrowing and beginning to rise, heavily rutted where water from above seeking its level had eroded it. Once the horses veered, the front wheels found the ditch and the carriage nearly toppled over. But it righted itself and continued on, the rain drumming monotonously on the roof and a disagreeable, musty odor permeating the velvet and leather interior. At last the house came into view, rising above the treetops, its slate-topped granite eminence dominating the area. Dandridge Castle, she mused, stood firm and unconquerable against the world, within it, ruling it, the master and builder of his own unconquerable world, one that she would be obliged to gain acceptance to.

Her heart sank. What was she doing here, three thousand miles from home, braving a relentless rain in a carriage that threatened to hurl her into the ditch, mentally girding herself to confront a houseful of strangers, brashly invading their privacy? She turned to Ross, sitting beside her, his hand encompassing hers reassuringly, and her concern gave way to warmth and fondness. For all the weight of his grief, he appeared determined to allay her fears at meeting the royal Dandridges and to lavish all the consideration and understanding he could muster, to ease the way.

The carriage ground to a stop on the gravel approach, the horses snorting, blue-white vapor rising from their nostrils. The driver, a stubby little Irishman with a fiery face, who wore a top hat a size too large for his head, got down from his seat, opened the door and saluted smartly.

"I'll fetch the bags, sor. Would there be somebody to help me wi' the troonks?"

Ross nodded and thanked him. A bent figure came loping up from the stables waving an umbrella and shouting welcome. Ross introduced Enos Pryne, who held the umbrella over them both and walked with them to the overhang at the front door, before he returned to pay the coach driver and assist him.

Standing before the door, she took a deep breath and braced herself. This was it. Within the next few moments she would be either accepted as Mrs. Ross Richard Dandridge or rejected as a fortune-hunting foreigner. Regardless of how badly it went, she prayed it wouldn't culminate in an offer of money, a bribe to buy his freedom. She had told herself a hundred times before and since the wedding that the Dandridge money had nothing whatsoever to do with her feelings for him. Which was true; she knew in her heart it was. Why was it that people whose business it was none of—families, even well-meaning friends of the "victim"—invariably assumed right off the mark that when somebody without money married somebody with, the money was the sole object of devotion?

Loving Ross as deeply as she did, she wouldn't have cared if he'd been stone broke and put glass on her finger instead of a diamond. All that really mattered was that the ring was hers and that it symbolized and proclaimed his love for her.

And the devil take anyone who refused to accept that!

He squeezed her hand, smiled and bending kissed her lightly on the lips.

"What's that for," she asked glumly, "luck?"

"It's for love, my queen. And one more, to welcome you home!" Taking her in his arms, he kissed her a second time. Their lips were still joined when Thursby opened the door, staring at them in surprise and confusion.

"Master Ross!"

"Thursby, meet Mrs. Dandridge. Darling, this is Mr. Thursby, major domo of Blackwood."

Hedridge, in crisp white uniform, her curious eyes framed by steel-rimmed spectacles, her gray hair piled and bunned and pinned to her head, crowning it impressively, stood in the middle of the parquet floor at the opposite end of the foyer, feet spread, hands on hips, as if she were preparing to challenge them to advance and be recognized. To the left, the household staff was lined up, at the far end the cook, who from her air of uneasiness, obviously wanted to get back to her stove.

On the second step of the stairway, her hand resting on the railing, stood Lavinia. Lisa recognized her instantly from his description of her. She was strikingly beautiful, she thought, so regal, so obviously capable at hushing conversation and drawing everyone's eyes without so much as turning her head. Her height and slenderness helped, and her skin and delicate hands. . . .

Introductions. Everyone greeted Lisa with smiles and seemingly sincere congratulations, almost as if they had undergone rehearsal for it. Lavinia stared at her unflinchingly, until she began to feel uncomfortable. Then Lavinia descended the stairs, walking the gauntlet of gaping maids and cook and Thursby and approached the couple.

"What a delightful surprise, Ross dear!" Kissing his cheek, she turned to Lisa and took her hands. "She's beautiful!"

Lisa felt the color rising in her cheeks as Ross introduced her to Lavinia. Unable to take her eyes off her, she consciously caught herself just before dipping in a curtsy.

"I must hear all about you, dear. Come with me!" Lavinia smiled at Ross and mother-henned Lisa off in the direction of the drawing room. Thursby and the others saw to the luggage brought in by Enos, and the driver and Ross turned to Hedridge.

"How is he?"

She shrugged. "Fit as can be expected."

"How is he taking it?"

"Famously. Better than Her Nibs."

"She looks all right."

"You should have seen her the night it happened. She practically tore the master bedroom to pieces; glass, broken furniture, the bedclothes flung about, sheets ripped to tatters, the lamp broken. You'd have thought six drunken sailors had ransacked the place!"

"Ross, oh, Ross." It was Lavinia calling from the drawing room. She and Lisa were standing before the fireplace under the portrait of Justine. "Do come here, I want to hear all about your fabulous tour!" Lisa threw him an appealing look, and he sensed at once that rescue was in order. What she needed more than conversation was a hot bath and a chance to lie down for half an hour or so.

"I want to go up and see Grandfather. Just for a few minutes. I'll be right down. Darling, wouldn't you like to change and maybe a bath?"

"Time enough for that," interposed Lavinia. "We've too much to talk about."

"Let me steal her, Lavinia, I do want her to meet Cyrus."

Lavinia put on a hurt look. "Can't he be made to wait ten minutes?"

"We won't be long, I promise."

"Perhaps she should have something to eat to fortify her first!" snapped Lavinia, laughing thinly, turning and walking off toward the study. Lisa came to him.

"Must I?"

"What?"

"Meet the dragon in his cave?"

"Has she been filling your head—"

"Not at all. You painted all the pictures of him." She turned and looked after the vanished Lavinia as Hedridge passed behind them on her way upstairs. Pausing halfway up, the nurse turned.

"Come up as soon as you can, Ross. I want to try to get him to take a nap, and you can help."

He gestured. "We'll be right along." Smiling, he kissed

Lisa's cheek. "Darling, they love you, every single one."

"Will he?"

"You'll have him eating out of your hand in two shakes." He paused, lowering his voice. "What do you think of Aunt Lavinia?"

"She's beautiful."

"She's different."

"Is that supposed to be some sort of warning?" she asked in pretended mystification.

"Of course not. I want you two to like each other. Father's death hit her hard, according to Hedridge."

"She needs a friend, I understand."

"She's left in a sort of limbo. She was preparing to become first lady around here, first lady of Providence; now she's back where she started, the poor relation, charitably given room and board."

"You're exaggerating, darling. She cuts a very impressive figure. I doubt if anyone here thinks of her in those terms."

"I'm sure she thinks of herself in those terms. The worst of it is for years she lived the dullest life imaginable, standing by watching her sister realize everything she wanted for herself. Then, when she's all but given up the ghost, her golden chance tumbles into her lap."

"And no sooner does it come than it vanishes, I know. I can imagine how she must feel."

"You're mistress of Blackwood now."

"A stranger popping in the door. Even worse, a foreigner. She has every right to resent me dreadfully."

"I don't think so."

"You're a man, darling. You wouldn't."

"You had nothing to do with what happened to her. She's too bright to blame you for her own bad luck. All the same, you are number one."

"Must we be numbers?"

"I'm afraid that's the way the game is played."

"Ross, I don't want to lord it over her or anyone else. I'm not that sort!"

"I know you're not."

She patted his cheek. "Very well, say no more about it. I'll be her friend, if she'll have me for a friend." She hesitated, clucking softly. "Only one thing does seem queer. About her, I mean."

"What?"

"Black dress or no, if I didn't know about your father, I'd never dream she was in mourning."

"She's just keeping it all inside." He slipped his arm about her waist, hugging her to him. "Are we ready for the dragon?"

Lavinia had drifted into the library. She ran her hand down a row of books that ended at one of the two oriel windows looking out upon the rose gardens at the rear of the house; she paused and took down Heaton's *The Tigress*.

The rain was letting up, the sky over the woods beyond the garden wall brightening, the blue-black colors of the clouds giving way to gray-blue. She sat in the window-seat, the book unopened in her lap, her eyes drawn to the glass. The drops coursed sinuously down the pane, running together, parting, reaching the sill one after another and settling into nothingness.

How like her life, everything coming down to nothing. So he'd brought home a wife. What a surprise. But after the initial shock at first sight of Lisa, Lavinia had managed it rather gracefully, she thought, with artful diplomacy and presence of mind. She was a pretty little thing, scarcely twenty, if that. Lovely red hair, although Lavinia herself disliked any color except black.

Ross, the sly wretch! With a pink-faced little girl wife, with—now that she reflected on it, a bosom too big for her body, eyes fairly drowning in naïveté, limited skill at small talk—a weakness in personality that would soon have him climbing the walls. She had the clumsily concealed manners and breeding of a cobbler's whelp. Given ten minutes with her, Cyrus would hit the rafters! What a sorry situation for Ross. For all his intelligence,

he persisted in indulging his penchant for common companionship. For all the culture and polish he may have absorbed, the Grand Tour had obviously taught him little about life and people. What a waste of man! So young, so virile, such a beautiful animal and now rich to boot, endowing *that* with all his worldly goods!

It was downright disgusting! But Cyrus would nip it in the bud. Despite his choler, his lapses into senility, his stubbornness, the horned toad was a sly one. He'd take one look at young Mrs. Dandridge, seize Ross with both hands and beat him to his knees with arguments. Before very long things would come to a head. Ross would be sent to Boston or New York on "urgent business," and when he returned he'd find his pretty little wench packed up and gone!

She opened her book halfway and read:

*She had him groveling at her feet, imploring her to forgive him and take him back. He swore upon his honor as an officer and a gentleman that he would be faithful to her until death. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he beseeched her to give him a second chance.*

*She heard him out without comment, gave him a moment of silence and then began laughing in his face . . .*

How intriguing, thought Lavinia. It must be a fascinating story.

"Come in!"

Ross winked at Lisa and opened the door. The old man sat in a rocking chair, with his feet not reaching the floor, unless the chair tilted forward. His back was to the window, his lap filled with newspapers, some of which had slipped to the floor. The first thing to catch her eye was the ivory handle of what she took to be a

magnifying glass shoved part way under his rump. Vanity, vanity, she thought, a gift in the cradle, coveted to the grave.

He was exactly as Ross had described him, even to the turned-down corners of his needle-thin mouth, which showed, she presumed, a look of instantaneous disapproval of her. Her heart began pounding.

"Ross!"

Up came the corners, a smile rearranging his wrinkles, his eyes glowing, his small head bobbing up and down.

"Grandfather!"

Ross moved quickly to him, leaning over, taking hold of him.

"Stand back, let me look at you. You've put on weight!"

"Not much."

Cyrus flung the back of his hand against Ross's stomach. "You're soft as a grape," he snorted.

"Grandfather, I want you to meet someone, my wife, Mrs. Ross Dandridge. Lisa, this is my grandfather."

The hand that had tested Ross's stomach dropped to the old man's lap like a bird on the wing shot down. His eyes widened and his lower jaw sank back into his face in astonishment. For a fleeting instant she thought his heart would give out and he'd slump to the floor before her very eyes. But as quickly as Ross's words hit him, and he reacted, he recovered. Back came his smile and the glow in his eyes.

"Mrs. Dandridge! Well, I'll be jiggered! Come here, child, let me look at you."

Lisa swallowed and moved up beside Ross.

"How do you do, Mr. Dandridge, I'm pleased to meet you."

"By God, she's a pretty one! Red hair. You got a temper?"

"Amen," said Ross quietly.

"Good for you," snapped Cyrus, "you'll need it in



this family." He cocked his head and squinted. "What's your name, child?"

"Lisa Allworth Dandridge."

"You talk funny. You a Boston girl?"

"She's English, Grandfather."

"Ahhh, you don't say! Well, if that ain't something! So welcome to America, Mrs. Lisa Allworth Dandridge, welcome to our house. Give me a kiss." He stabbed at one sunken cheek with his forefinger. "Go ahead, I won't bite!" Lisa smiled, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him warmly. "Thank you." He eyed Ross, his face becoming serious. "You heard about your father."

"Yes."

"You're in charge now; we've a lot to talk about. You through running around Europe, ready to settle down to a job o' work?"

"That's what I'm back for."

"You're going to have your hands full. And you'll be the only Dandridge there. Terrible thing, that fire. I blame myself."

"You?"

"I lost the *Belle*, nobody else. I never wanted her built in the first place. She was too big, too tall, too risky. I was dead against her from the start, and she knew it. I jinxed her!"

"Superstitious as ever, aren't you?"

"I tell you I—" He stopped short, leaned to one side and looked past them. His voice, tinged with concern, suddenly became ice cold. "What you standing there gawking at?"

Lisa turned. Nurse Hedridge filled the doorway, her hands folded in front of her, a look of annoyance on her homely features.

"A disagreeable old man, what else!"

"You're no spring chicken yourself, you know, and if I'm disagreeable there's them around this place makes

me so. I don't want any o' that damnable swill, if that's what you're hanging about for!"

"It's not time for your medicine. I want you to take a nap."

"No thank you, Ross and I've got business to discuss. You go find something to do. Go on downstairs and pick a fight with the cook!"

"Mr. Dandridge—"

"Grandfather," interposed Ross, "you really ought to take a nap. I'm going to and so is Lisa, aren't you, dear?"

"I—yes, of course. I always take an afternoon nap."

"Good for you. I don't!" rasped Cyrus.

Ross turned to Hedridge in the doorway. "Give us a few minutes."

She shrugged and walked off.

"Why don't I leave you two to talk?" said Lisa. She extended her hand to Cyrus. "I've looked forward to this meeting so long. It's been a pleasure, sir."

"No 'sir.' You call me Cyrus."

"Cyrus it is." She glanced at Ross. "I'll freshen up." He nodded and she went out, closing the door.

"Pull up that chair," said the old man, snapping his fingers and pointing at a captain's chair in front of a drafting board in one corner. Ross looked about. The room was as depressingly furnished as he'd remembered it being, bed, armoire, washbasin, dresser, two chairs, the drafting board and a disreputable-looking mahogany bookcase packed with dog-eared volumes, most of them with broken bindings. No rug, no mirror, no pictures on the walls.

He placed the chair directly in front of his grandfather and sat down.

"I like her," said Cyrus. "She's warm, she's got personality, and she's pretty as a picture. But see here, we sent you over to look at buildings and get some culture into your bones. And to smooth down some o' the rough edges!"

"They're smoothed, believe me. I learned how to eat and dress and dance and converse and fight like a gentleman."

"And make love, obviously. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"How'd you meet her? How'd you get together?" He leaned forward, turning his head to hear better.

"It all happened fast. As you know I sailed from New York to Liverpool, signed up for the tour and got my schedule and itinerary and all that and took a steamer to northern Ireland."

"Steamer!" Cyrus spat out the word.

"They don't use clippers," responded Ross. "I saw the Giant's Causeway, took a ship to Glasgow, went on a walking tour of the Highlands, browsed about Edinburgh for a couple of days soaking up tradition, then we worked our way down to London. A fellow I'd met on the tour, an Englishman, introduced us. He'd known Lisa back home in Mansfield."

"What's Mansfield?"

"In Nottingham."

"Where's that?"

"Will you let me tell you without your interrupting every two words?"

"All right, all right, don't get your dander up. I'm just curious, that's all."

"Nottingham. Don't you remember the Sheriff of Nottingham, Robin Hood's nemesis? Anyway, it's in what they call the Midlands. And Mansfield's in the central part, near the Derby border."

"What was she doing in London?"

"Visiting relatives. We were introduced and we hit it off beautifully. She'd never met a Yankee before. She thought we all wore coonskin caps and deerskins and moccasins."

"Never mind that, how'd you wind up marrying her? Is she pregnant?"

"No, she's not pregnant! And I resent your asking."

"Go right ahead and resent!"

"Do you want to hear this or don't you?"

"I haven't heard a damned thing yet! When'd you ask her to marry you?"

"We had four days together in London, then I had to leave for the continent with the others. But I couldn't get her out of my mind. I spent three weeks on the other side, got as far as Paris and gave it up as a bad job."

"You what!"

"I quit the tour. I went back to London, but of course she'd gone home to Mansfield by then, so I went on up there."

"And?"

"I located her, bought her an engagement ring and talked her into marrying me. I fell for her like a ton of bricks."

"After four days?"

"The four days in London were nothing. It was that wasted three weeks on the continent that brought me to my senses. I got to thinking about her so I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep."

"Damned fool! Any man who gets that dizzy over nothing more'n a female ought to have his head examined!"

"Why don't I leave now and let you take your nap? You need a nap, you need something."

"All right, all right. So you went back and found her and asked her to marry you."

"And she accepted, with one reservation; she insisted I get back on the tour."

"Sensible girl."

"Along about then I needed the Grand Tour about as much as smallpox, but she put her foot down so off I went. I got back a thousand years later, after France and Germany and Italy and every whistle-stop in between; she met me in London, we were married in a little chapel in a place called Barking and here we are."

"You love her?"

"That's a stupid question!"

"She love you?"

"She's crazy about me."

"You sure she's not crazy about you coming from a reasonably well-to-do family?"

"I didn't say two words to her about money or the business or any of it before she accepted my proposal."

"She looks to be bright as a new penny, she likely figured any young fellow who comes all the way over from America to take the Grand Tour has to be from money."

"Let me tell you, half the boys on the tour were poor as church mice, working their way down the continent scrubbing boots or pots in restaurants or you name it to earn a dollar. What's more I resent the implication, I'm not exactly a newborn baby, you know. I can read people as well as you can, and I recognize sincerity."

"You didn't read much about that fellow who tried to put a bullet in your brisket. His girlfriend played you for a fool, all right."

"I was younger then, a lot less experienced."

"Ho ho ho!"

"You wanted to hear how we met, now you know. And in exchange you promised me you'd take a nap."

"I promised no such thing!"

"You'll take a nap or I won't go to work for you!"

"You don't and I'll see you tossed out on your ear, new bride and all!"

They began discussing the yards. The three bright spots were the three new ships under construction, two of which had already been sold. But beyond this to make up for the loss of the *Belle*, there was little to cheer about. Cyrus declared unequivocally that the end of the clipper ship was in sight.

"Steam is taking over."

"That's ridiculous, steamships are too slow and you know it."

"They're getting faster all the time and ton for ton they've got fatter holds than clippers. And even speed has to take second place to safety. You can bet the insurance underwriters are looking forward to the change-over with glee. It all comes down to money, Ross. Speed and beauty and tradition don't stand a chance when they come up against hard dollars."

"So what do we do, stop building clipper ships and start building great metal tubs?"

"Belching black smoke all over creation and stinking up the seas from here to Shanghai! No, we'll close up the gates and lock 'em and throw away the key before we stoop to that. There's got to be another way, another type of vessel. Smaller than a clipper, maybe. Speed is our only edge."

"You just said—" He caught himself. The old man was beginning to tire, yawning, blinking his eyes, but refusing to surrender to fatigue, pressing on with his concern over the future. Then it happened.

"We've always looked ahead, Gray, and we've got to keep looking ahead, staying ahead of the pack. When Ross comes home he'll be going to work. That's exactly what we need, new blood, a fresh outlook. He's a good boy, smart as a whip, but he's got to be harnessed. It'll be your job to guide him. Have you heard from him?"

"No."

"Well, let him sow his wild oats, it's his last chance. Now I want to talk about the *Liberty Belle*."

"I can't now, Cyrus, I have to get back to the yards. You ought to get some rest, you look as if you need it."

Cyrus nodded grudgingly.

"I'll just loosen my tie and kick my shoes off and lie down. I won't sleep, I never do, not anymore."

Ross helped him to his feet and over to the bed. He took off his shoes and socks and the rest of his clothing

piece by piece down to his underwear. His body was all bones, the skin loose and wrinkled, with little flesh beneath it. He looked more like a child than a man grown; his skin was cold to the touch and discolored with blotches over his upper body, his fingernails corn yellow, the fingers themselves pitifully slender and twisted awkwardly. All of his joints stood out in their positions, the flesh surrounding them dried out and deep sunken. His hair was white and dry as tinder, thinning out over his scalp and bunched up above his ears. His breath came with an eerie rattling sound, as if his tired lungs were verging on collapse.

He had lost weight since Ross had last seen him, five, perhaps seven pounds, at least. In a body so small and spare, it showed. He reminded himself to ask Hedridge what she was doing about that, whether or not she'd gotten him back onto milk, which he despised as much as his yellow medicine.

He pulled back the covers and laid him down carefully, gently, bringing the sheet and blanket back up to his chin and tucking them in. His eyes were closed and he was breathing through his nose now, deeply, loudly, with an effort that had become habitual.

Ross stood a moment looking down at him, at the sight of all that coiled, barbed-wire strength drained off by the years. What was left: the hull of the man, the rapidly emptying shell. And the fine mind straying as it had, reaching back in time, a mind so obedient, so reliable for so many years now deserting him.

He left, closing the door quietly, clearing the mist from his eyes with the tips of his fingers as he made his way back downstairs.

"Cyrus, Cyrus, where have you gone?"

## VIII

Lavinia sat opposite Cyrus, Ross and Lisa on either side separating them. It had stopped raining, and the woods outside the French windows had come alive with the sounds of early evening. Three hours rest had helped Cyrus, clearing his eyes, restoring his energies and honing the cutting edge of his tongue.

"Sounds as if everything over there's on the verge o' collapse," he observed acidly. "Don't they ever build anything new?"

"We stayed in a brand new hotel in Ostend," said Ross, toying with his compote and winking furtively at Lisa.

"Ostend, that sounds like Holland, right?"

"Belgium."

"Same thing. According to the *Journal*, we're getting a new hotel, two hundred rooms, built-in bathtubs, velvet drapes, the works."

"How was the weather on the tour?" asked Lavinia.

"It rained cats and dogs practically all the way through France. We were cooped up for days on end and when we did get out the roads were a disaster. And, surprisingly enough, the French turned out a lot more stiff-necked than the British."

"Impossible," said Lisa, "the British are the most proper sticks in Christendom. The men are so stiff they crack when they bow."

Cyrus grinned. "You sound glad to be away from there."

"I'm glad to be here. Glad we're here." She touched Ross's hand fondly across the table.

"And we're pleased you've come, isn't that so, Lavinia?"



"Definitely. You're a breath of fresh air, Lisa. I promise I'll monopolize you until you come to loathe the sight of me. There's so much we can do together."

"I'm looking forward to it. Can we go to Boston one day? I must see where the colonists dumped the tea."

"Of course, dear, anything you like." Lavinia glanced at Ross, whose eyes were drawn to his salad. This was incredible, she thought, like a terrifying dream come to life: Ross showing up after two years, blithely announcing that he was married to this slip of a girl who'd wrecked all her own plans, snatching away everything she'd waited and worked for. All thanks to that damned ship!

Married or not, though, Ross fascinated her. In his absence he'd matured. There was little resemblance now to the unsophisticated, undisciplined hellrake, the breaker of hearts and heads who had sailed away earlier. No longer was he the overgrown little boy, innocent-eyed, self-willed, burning with youthful energy and enthusiasm. The change was evident in his eyes; they were older, given to brooding, and he appeared more self-assured and commanding. She pictured his man's body, lean and perfect and hard, the two of them standing naked in the master bedroom, running their hands slowly over each other's flesh. He took hold of her, pulling her close, her full, round breasts hard against his chest. She raised her mouth to his, and his kiss made her body cry out to possess him. His hands slid slowly down her breasts, caressing her flesh and picking her up, he carried her to the bed. He lay down beside her, turning her body toward him, the length of his organ hard against her.

"This roast beef is delicious," said Lisa. The men agreed and Lavinia nodded.

She can't have him, she vowed. She doesn't deserve him. She has no right to him, she's not woman enough.

## IX

Two nights later, Lavinia gave a welcome-home party, introducing the new Mrs. Dandridge to the cream of Providence society. It proved a festive occasion, and the clinking of glasses, the murmur of conversation, the laughter and music lasted until dawn. Resplendent in a lovely antique silk gown and an emerald tiara, a gift from Ross expressly for the occasion, Lisa danced with a score of garrulous older men while Ross provided the same service for their wives. Thursby's dinner, constructed about lobster baked in the shell and an excellent white Bordeaux, was memorably impressive and the evening proved thoroughly enjoyable.

In the days that followed, Lisa and Lavinia were inseparable, shopping and lunching together, visiting friends of the family, attending lectures and a Catherine Hayes concert, riding about the country, even venturing to Boston for three days. They wandered the Public Gardens and visited the old North Church and other sites of historical interest; they dined at Crowder's on Tremont Street and Leffingwell's in Charlestown, took in a road company production of *Richelieu* and shopped until neither one could walk another step, Lavinia buying a dress and ordering Brussels carpeting for the stairway, taking pains to consult Lisa on the color. And Lisa, herself, invested in a long Scotch shawl and a pair of French dyed kid gloves.

She returned to Providence exhausted but brimming with praise for Boston, prompting Cyrus to comment that "for a Britisher, she was a good loser."

During her absence, Ross had gone to work, staying at the yards from dawn till dusk every day but Sunday. Three days after her return from Boston, he took her

with him to show her the work in progress. The symphony of sawing and hammering, drilling and chopping and top-of-the-lung yelling was deafening, but it was exciting standing in the very center of the activity, watching the ships taking shape, knowing that soon they would be rigged with sails, painted and varnished, the last grommet polished, the last new rope made taut and the whole "given to the sea."

"Sometimes in sacrifice," observed Ross above the din, "payment for permission to ride her breast." In his shirtsleeves, his fingers stained with ink, a greasy smear on his tawny forehead, he appeared totally involved, as if he'd turned his hand to every job from copying invoices to helping the smith fasten the chains to the anchors. Shading his eyes from the glaring sun, he glanced out past the sea fence to the water, the waves riding listlessly to the sea wall, striking it and withdrawing.

"It's all going to turn out right," she said assertively, "just as I told you it would."

"For now, yes; for the future, it's hard to say. But one way or another we'll make it. We have to. I won't be the one to lose it all, that you can depend on."

"Of course you won't, and stop being so pessimistic!"

"If that happened, I'd never forgive myself."

"God forbid it, but even if it did, you wouldn't be to blame."

"It's not a question of who's to blame, it's Grandfather. A man starts something like all this, works at it, watches it grow, sees it prosper, he should at least be able to die knowing it's on firm footing. I can't let him get to the end seeing it going down the drain."

"Would you stop building clipper ships and change to steam?"

"Just hearing the word makes me sick to my stomach, but we may have to."

As they talked on above the racket, she got the impression that, in spite of his concern and the massive responsibility he had shouldered, he was enthusiastic

about the job, stimulated by the challenge it presented.

"Is Providence one of the bigger ports?"

He shook his head. "It's hardly a port at all, anymore. Boston and New York get all the seagoing commerce, one of the reasons why we stay clear of that end of it. The textile business took over the city in the 1820s and the mills are still thriving, which really makes it a shop town on the water."

"Hello there!" It was Tom Overstreet, in a disheveled suit, wearing work gloves and carrying a roll of what she assumed to be blueprints under one arm. Puffing on his pipe, he came toward them waving. "How are you, Lisa?"

"A bit overwhelmed, I must say."

"Ever see a shipyard before?" She shook her head. "Well, it's not very complicated. The main idea is to keep up the noise. Finish up one ship, keep another going and lay the keel to a third. Then, when the first one's shipshape, rigged and ready to go, the one behind her moves up to the finishing stage, and so on, with a new one getting started."

She sensed that Tom needed Ross, so she kissed Ross, excused herself and walking back to the main gate, mounted her horse, a coal-black stallion with a wild, foot-long mane, and a single white mark in the center of his forehead. Swinging him about, she took a second look at the corner of the yard nearby where she'd been told the *Liberty Belle* had stood, the charred remains having earlier been removed. They'd been taken away as expeditiously as possible, according to Ross, probably, she thought, to keep the workers' morale from sinking any lower than it had already. Removed as well was the watchman's shack that had contained the stove, the suspected cause of the fire that fateful night.

Riding across the bridge and through the town, she reflected on what might have been had there been no fire. Her own life would have been little changed, but everyone else's would have been spared these wrenching com-

plications and the sudden need for drastic adjustment. Gray's death had stunned Cyrus. It had hurled the business into Ross's lap without ceremony or notice and had destroyed Lavinia's hopes and dreams completely. Had Gray lived, Lavinia would have been happily married now, and as secure and protected as Queen Victoria. The better Lisa got to know Lavinia, the sorrier she felt for her. She tried so hard to be light-hearted and happy, but her face, her eyes especially, played her false. Lisa wished she could do something for her to lift her up in ways other than spending as much time as possible in her company. Unhappiness was a very private emotion, one well bulwarked against outside influences.

She rode on. The spare wooden three-story buildings on either side of the cobbled street gave way to single-family dwellings painted yellow and white, displaying window boxes and other refinements denied the homes of the poorer people, which clustered in the heart of the city.

Conceding prejudice in his favor, she nevertheless admired Ross for his diligence and dedication, and she could scarcely be envious of the hours he devoted to the work. Such a good man, so willing to give his all, so human, so dear.

She was a lucky woman; she could only hope for his sake that the Dandridge luck would change, the business would weather the blow and the future would brighten far beyond his and Cyrus's expectations.

## X

The days that followed brought Ross and Lisa closer, deepening their love and affection for each other. For her part, Lavinia stubbornly ignored the obvious. Her infatuation for Ross continued to grow until it took all the will power she possessed to resist declaring her feelings for him.

Sight of the happy couple arm in arm in the garden outside her bedroom window was enough to kindle a fury within her that culminated in a screaming outburst witnessed only by Mody.

On Sunday she was sitting at her window, engrossed in *The Tigress*, when she happened to glance up from the book just in time to see them ride by on horseback, stop by the rear gate, dismount and embrace and kiss before walking their horses around the house to the stable. It proved the last straw. Every night without exception—even the two nights sharing a hotel room with Lisa in Boston—Lavinia had lain awake fantasizing, imagining herself in Ross's arms, the two of them in bed covering each other with kisses, their bodies joined, gleaming with perspiration. And Lavinia's passions surging through her like an electric current. She saw her face, her hair in disarray, eyes rolling wildly in her head, moaning, on the verge of fainting in sheer ecstasy as they drove to climax.

Her sleep, during the night following that amorous episode outside her window, was filled with dreams of rescue. Ross carried her from a burning building; he saved her from a pack of ravenous jackals; he rescued her from drowning, each time bringing her to bed and making love to her, unleashing passions within that drove her to the edge of frenzy and left her exhausted.

In the midst of one such episode she awoke suddenly,

her head throbbing, heart pounding, body drenched with sweat. At that moment, at the opposite end of the hallway in the master bedroom—meticulously restored by the housekeeper in the wake of Lavinia's outburst—Ross and Lisa separated, lying back, permitting their bodies to slip into the delicious relaxation of aftermath.

"I love you so much," he said, "you make me feel as if a door has opened and I've come into a new life, a whole new world, our private paradise."

"My darling."

Outside, a breeze came meandering up the hill and began exploring the eaves, the branches creaking and scraping the roof. Hands clasped, they lay staring at the ceiling, basking in the roseate glow of serenity.

"Lisa. Lisa."

"I've never been so happy," she said. "Being this contented seems sinful, as if I were stealing more than I'm entitled to."

He laughed. "In this world, when it comes to happiness, you're entitled to all you can get."

"I just think of Lavinia and how lonely she must be this very moment, with only her cat for companionship. Poor woman, she's so sweet. It's so sad, Ross."

"Maybe you ought to try and find a man for her."

"She doesn't need me for that. No woman that beautiful needs a matchmaker. Besides, she's still in love, I know she is, I sense it."

"Then she's being very foolish."

"She can't help what's in her heart. It's no simple matter, letting go of a dream."

"She's got a lot of years ahead of her, she can't go on brooding for the rest of her life."

"She won't let go until someone else comes along."

"That's what I'm saying. You should look around for her."

"Not I, I'd surely botch it up. It's strange, though."

He sat up and the moonlight slanting in through the window crossed his chest like a pale blue sash. She put

her hand against the stripe of moonlight and kept it there.

"What?" he asked.

"All things considered, she should resent me with a passion. I put myself in her position, and I'd resent anyone, man, woman or child, invading this house the way I did, under these circumstances. And yet she doesn't have a jealous bone in her body."

"Either that or she's very good at hiding it."

"That's unfair! She's been marvelous to me, from the moment I stepped across the threshold. You should be grateful. With you gone all day she keeps me the best of company. We've become like sisters."

"I must admit I'm surprised at the way she dotes on you."

"Better you start appreciating it!"



## XI

Erica lived in a cramped little apartment one floor up from the street in the Fox Point section of the city down near the inlet entrance. The place smelled musty, rats scratched about in the walls—despite the presence of her large gray tomcat—ships whistled and hooted practically just outside her window, the floor creaked in pain every time one set foot on it. All in all, to Lavinia, it was as dreary as a tomb, even on the sunniest day. But then the windows hadn't been washed in months. The floor was littered with newspapers and threadbare rugs and the cheap furniture scattered about willy-nilly was scratched and battered. What annoyed Lavinia was the fact that Erica was far from destitute, her family having left her more than enough to live on. It was only that she was so deeply involved in witchcraft, in reading tarot cards for hours on end, and poring through every book she could lay hands on that was remotely concerned with tarot, numerology and the like. Thus, she existed completely oblivious of her surroundings.

"This place smells," said Lavinia, seated opposite her at the table in the center of the room.

"I live here. I don't notice it," said Erica airily. She had exposed one wrinkled breast to permit her familiar, the tom, to suck the protuberance under it. Lavinia was suckling Mody in similar fashion, his lips firmly gripping her own teat.

"Can't you at least pick up the papers?"

"Why bother? It's only messed up again in a day or two. I don't happen to have the wherewithal to live like a highborn lady like others I know," she added, moving the cards on the table before her with her free hand.

"Don't delude yourself, my dear. I'm back to being

the poor relation again, worse off than before now that she's arrived." Petting Mody, she eased his lips from her teat, pulling him down to her lap and covering herself. "Well, you've heard it all, what do you think?"

"I think you're going off the deep end."

"Erica, I want her dead. You get hold of some arsenic or strychnine and I'll do the rest."

"I'm sure you will, and get us both hanged for murder. They do hang accomplices, you know!"

"Obviously I can't buy the stuff. My dear, what are you worried about? Nobody knows we know each other."

"I wouldn't want to bet on that, not my life. Besides, I'm thinking of you, too, dear. Why take such an awful risk?"

"Because I'm desperate, damn it! I can't go on like this, I've taken all I can stand!"

"You simply can't live without him."

"That's it in a nutshell."

"And what if they catch you, how do you think he'll react when he finds out? You think you'd still be able to inveigle him into a love match?"

"I won't be caught. What are you so squeamish about all of a sudden? She won't suffer."

"It's not that, it's not even the fear of getting caught, really. It's your whole plan, it just doesn't seem to make sense. Supposing you do succeed. It may be months, even years before you get him to fall in love with you."

"That's my problem." She set her teeth and sucked in her breath. "I've got to have him, Erica. I can't go on living under the same roof with him, seeing him every day, lying in bed at night thinking about him. I'll go out of my mind!"

Erica released her familiar, sending him scooting across the floor to join Mody by the coal stove. "Your own nephew."

Lavinia began laughing, forcing it, her voice rising, filling the room, frightening both cats and sending them scurrying into the bedroom under the bed.

"He's not my nephew, dear. He never was!"

Erica sighed and eyed her tolerantly, the look of a patient parent for a stupid child. "He's your sister's son."

"Is he? It may interest you to know, my sister never had a son. She couldn't. Oh, she was dying to get pregnant; she would have given her eyes to bear a boy or a girl, but it just wasn't to be. They say if a woman wants to too much something can happen to her to prevent it. I believe it, whether it was physical or mental. Gray wanted a son, of course, and Cyrus a grandson. Just mention the word 'baby' and their eyes would light up like Christmas trees. Justine became desperate, she kept telling me how guilty she felt, letting him down so. And of course Gray was very patient, very understanding, which only made her feel worse about it. She got to a point where she became frantic."

"Why didn't they adopt?"

"She considered it, but Cyrus wanted no part of adoption. Anyway, she came to me in tears one night, pleading with me to sleep with Gray so that I'd get pregnant. Of course she'd take the credit."

"You did it!"

"Why not? I loved her, I felt sorry for her, and him. Then, too, I'd always thought him attractive; he was, you know. And Justine insisted that I leave my rooms downtown and come and live at the house, after the baby was born. My own room, all the money I'd ever need, comfort, security.

"I took her place, I became pregnant. She pretended—quite cleverly—to be pregnant herself. I gave birth to Ross, handed him over to her and a month later moved in bag and baggage."

"You devious bitch!"

"More practical than devious. We all got what we wanted, didn't we? And Gray was never the wiser, nor the old man. There was only one problem."

"Gray."

"I slept with him a number of times, enough to convince me that I had to have him."

"You fell in love with him."

"I thought I did, which in a way amounts to the same thing. Nothing like what I feel for Ross, but I wanted Gray. I'd watched him from afar, from across the dinner table and across the room, and of course there was nothing I could do, with her standing in my way. Nothing I really wanted to do back then. I was very upright and honorable in those days, and I loved her dearly, so much so I began debating whether or not I should move out. I came very close to doing just that, but she and he talked me out of it."

"And what about Ross?"

"I watched him grow up. His Aunt Vinnie would take him horseback riding, to the beach to look for shells, or downtown for sweets. I watched him, I watched Gray, I watched Justine; sometimes I think my entire life up to this point has been spent watching other people enjoy themselves. I should have been a governess. Perhaps that's why I'm bitter, and why I want him and intend to get him if I have to boil that little bitch in oil to get her out of our lives!"

"Well, I think you're going about it completely wrong. You murder her, even if you get away with it, he'll go into mourning. He won't be interested in you or anyone else. And when he does snap out of it, he'll probably go running to the first pretty young thing he sees."

"I can prevent that happening."

"But what if he leaves Providence? What if he goes back to Europe? When tragedy strikes, that's the first thing some people do, get away."

"Erica, if you've got a better idea, I'm listening."

"I don't, I just happen to think yours is all wrong. I think you ought to talk to Ledion."

"Why bring Him into this?"

"What can you lose? Why not discuss it with Him; He's bound to come up with something better than murdering her out of hand. Why don't I talk to Him, He can come to you at the house."

"No! That would never do."

"Then you can meet here. I'll leave the two of you alone. What do you say?"

Lavinia thought it over and agreed.

Two days later, Erica sent a message to the house instructing Lavinia to be at her apartment promptly at eleven o'clock that night. The day dragged by for Lavinia. She and Lisa rode to Warwick and back, which took up most of the afternoon. It was a gray day, with the nip of autumn in the air. The sugar maples and red maples were already beginning to bring their brilliant hues through the woodland, up the hills and mountains, spilling down into the valleys in bright streaks seen from a distance. Glittering golden leaves appeared on the stunted little striped maples and the black maples gave evidence of yielding their green raiment to a rainbow of color. Soon the sumacs would burst into flame, the birches and aspens would turn a buttery yellow and the oaks fringing Blackwood, as far as the site of the sabat, would wrap their branches in maroon and purple.

"This part of the country is so beautiful," remarked Lisa, as they turned their horses up the twisting road leading to the house.

"Give them two or three more weeks, and every tree will be in color. Just too beautiful to describe. Feel the chill in the air?"

Riding behind her, Lavinia studied Lisa's back and her red hair spilling like a flame down the center of it. For a brief instant she felt a twinge of pity for her, but it passed as quickly as it came. She was, after all, only a pawn in the game, an obstruction that must be removed to clear the way. Again and again Lavinia assured herself that there was nothing personal in what had to be done;

she had no real resentment toward the girl, she did not hate her.

Or did she? How can you plot to kill someone you don't hate?

Her restlessness increased as Ross came home from work, the dinner hour passed and twilight gave way to darkness. The clouds that had overcast the afternoon remained concealing the moon and stars. There was no threat of rain, but it got colder as night took possession of the land.

Shortly after ten-thirty, she dressed, went out by the back door and walked over to Enos Pryne's cottage nearby the stables, interrupting his carving and ordering him to saddle a horse. She didn't particularly like Pryne; he was too old for his job, slow in responding, become lazy and irresponsible and was fortunate that Cyrus turned a blind eye to his ineffectualness, permitting him to stay on. With all his other shortcomings, Pryne was also extremely nosy.

"Where would you be heading this time o' night, Miss Lavinia?" he asked, pocketing his knife and shaking the wood chips out of his lap onto the bare wooden floor.

"I'll be back within two hours; see that you leave the stable door unlocked."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, miss, the master'd have my hide."

"Just do it, I'll take the responsibility."

"I dasn't!"

"Then when you bring the horse out, give me the key."

"What if you lose it?"

She didn't need this, arguing with a common stableman. She was becoming nervous, upset and in no mood to be delayed by him or anyone else.

"Get the horse, the bay!"

He shrugged, scratched his stubbled chin and shuffled out the door. Moments later, he brought the bay around and, checking the saddle strap cinch, helped her to mount.

"Now, the key."

He gave it to her and turning, walked back into the cottage muttering to himself.

The ride to Erica's apartment took less than twenty minutes, down the woodland road, into the clear, onto the city road and presently the cobbled streets, the horse's hooves clattering loudly over the stones as he carried her along between the darkened buildings. She came to Erica's house, tied the horse to a ring outside, and ascended the stairs.

Erica appeared at the door in answer to her knock and handed her a key.

"Take this and lock up if you leave before I get back."

"How will you get in?"

"I have an extra key. You can give me this one back at the sabat tomorrow night."

"You don't have to leave."

Erica winked and grinned. "I think He'd prefer it. He should be here in a few minutes. Go on in, sit down and wait."

## XII

She touched the candle on the table with the tip of her finger, lighting it. Its steady glow painted shadows up the shabby walls and across the ceiling. Erica's cat dozed in one corner and it occurred to her that she should have brought along Mody to keep him company. Sitting at the table, she toyed with the cards, tracing the likeness of the Hanged Man with her fingernail, his ankle and the noose surrounding it, then the gibbet. The only sounds in the room were the heavy breathing of the cat, an occasional muffled scratching in the walls and the ticking of a clock in the bedroom.

Her eyes were drawn to the candle, the black wick supporting the flame, the tiny pool of wax beneath. Suddenly she was aware of a familiar odor, acrid fumes assailing her nostrils, faint at first, then quickly getting stronger.

She swung about. He was standing behind her, His mask in one hand, clutching the folds of His cloak with the other. Placing the mask on the table, He reached for her hand.

"Lavinia."

The touch of His fingers sent a tingling sensation racing up her spine as she moved with Him to the bedroom and began disrobing. Her eyes were drawn to his member, erect as always, as hard as a cold chisel. Soon she was standing naked before Him and taking her upper arms in His icy hands. He eased her down upon the bed, lowering His body down upon hers and preparing to insert his member.

The leatherlike scales of His chest pinched the softness of her breasts, but this mild discomfort only



heightened the thrill of contact. The coldness between her thighs would be painful at first and she stiffened slightly in anticipation as he began to enter. The pain started, but quickly gave way to an exhilarating tremor that set her shivering all over. Crying out and wrapping her arms and legs about him, she thrust her body upward.

They copulated three times without pausing. Having satisfied Himself, Ledion suddenly leaped from the bed, pulling her out of it, sweeping up her clothes and flinging them at her. She dressed hastily and they returned to the table and sat.

"Erica has told me everything. There's no point in repeating what I already know. If you want him enough to murder her, you must be desperate."

"I am!"

He smiled, his dark lips taut over his teeth, his red eyes glittering evilly. "Or is it that you don't want her to have him?"

"That, too," she confessed. "I cannot go on this way, Master, I must have him!"

"Lust with incest. How delightful. You realize, of course, that I will continue to enjoy you."

"Naturally." She leaned forward expectantly.

"You please me, Lavinia, and I would like very much to help you." He paused, lowering his burning eyes to the cards and poking among them. "The important thing is time, time for you to make him fall in love with you. Killing her outright won't give you that time. If anything, it will make it much harder for you. Even impossible. I have a thought. Retroincarnation."

"Reincarnation?"

"No." He began to explain in detail. The idea was fantastic, but the longer He talked the less so it became and the more appealing, until she became convinced that it was a brilliant plan, as ingenious as it appeared foolproof. She could hardly conceal her en-

thusiasm, clapping her hands softly and nodding her head at every other word. He finished outlining it, then went on to explicit instructions:

"Do you know Dr. Settle?"

"Vaguely. Erica knows him well. He's a warlock, isn't he?"

"He's also a hypnotist." His hand deserted the tarot cards and went to His cloak, taking out a small square paper packet, holding it between the candle and His eyes. "This powder in a drink is tasteless, but when taken into the system causes severe stomach pains, nothing serious, but acutely distressing." He handed it to her. "This is what you're to do."

### XIII

Lavinia had insisted that Lisa accompany her on the train downstate to Westerly. For what she had to do, the distance to be covered coming and going—approximately a hundred miles—raised some doubt in her mind as to the wisdom of relying on Dr. Settle. She'd much prefer the assistance of someone closer, but she knew better than to question Ledion's judgment.

She had told Lisa about Timberlake's, a "darling shop" in Westerly that she herself made a point of visiting once or twice each year, assuring her that the selection of styles was better than anything available in Providence or even Boston. Lisa leaped to the bait. They took an early train, arriving in the middle of the morning. Locating the shop in Hanover Street, they spent three hours plowing through fur-trimmed boucle-cloth jackets, kersey jackets with fancy buttons, capes, suits, skirts, blouses and waists.

They emerged shortly after one with their purchases, and Lavinia suggested that they have lunch at a nearby tea shop she had patronized on two previous occasions. The noon crowd was beginning to thin by the time they sat down at a window table for two. Each ordered a sandwich and tea and they chatted away gaily as their lunch arrived and they began eating.

Through the window was a sun-drenched seascape of the harbor, and the blue water beyond stretched to the horizon dotted with lobster boats and other small sailing craft. As they continued talking and eating Lisa turned to comment on a tall brigantine entering the harbor from the south. Seeing her chance, Lavinia took the packet of powder given her by Ledion out of her

bag under the table and poured it into Lisa's tea.

Turning from the window, Lisa obligingly reached for her cup and drank. Within seconds her face became contorted with pain.

"What is it, dear, what's the matter?"

"My stomach. The tea."

Lavinia looked into her own half-emptied cup and then examined Lisa's. "I don't understand. I drank the tea, too."

Lisa was beginning to perspire, the color draining from her cheeks. "I feel terrible. Call the waiter."

"Never mind him, let's get out of here. We must get you to a doctor!"

Leaving money for the bill and picking up their packages, Lavinia took hold of her hand and ran her out the door into the street. By now, Lisa was gripping her stomach and groaning in pain. Lavinia glanced about.

"There's a shingle up the street on the other side. Come."

"Lavinia—"

"Hang on, dear, we'll have you there in a jiffy!"

The walks were thronged with people and the street filled with traffic, but they managed to thread their way across and up the opposite side, dashing up the stairs to a door marked:

### J. Settle M.D.

Bursting inside, they were greeted by sight of a desk with an empty chair behind it, framed diplomas and watercolors adorning the walls and the pungent odor of rubbing alcohol. A man leaned around the jamb of the door to the adjoining room. Lavinia stared, he was exactly as Erica had described him in the woods on their way back from the sabat, the most emaciated-looking human being she had ever seen.

She explained what had happened as Settle helped Lisa into the examination room and seated her.

"Unbutton her collar," he said, moving to a tall

wooden cabinet, with shelves filled with bottles. Examining a number, selecting one and checking the label, he poured a spoonful into a glass, mixed it with tap water and thrust the glass into Lisa's hand.

"Drink it down."

She began to and paused. "It tastes horrible!"

"Drink it, all of it!"

She complied, and when she had emptied the glass he helped her to the couch, easing her down upon it.

"I can still feel the pain."

"Still bad?"

"It's better, but it's still there."

"What she really needs is a nap," he said. "Even half an hour would do it. It would settle her stomach."

"I can't possibly fall asleep," said Lisa.

"I'll help you to. Stay where you are and try and relax." Moving to a small table, he opened a drawer, taking out a silver pocket watch and chain. "I want you to lie very still, breathe normally and keep your eyes on this watch. Don't move and don't interrupt me, just follow directions and you'll fall asleep." He began swinging the watch slowly over her face. "Follow it with your eyes, back and forth, back and forth. You're beginning to feel very relaxed. Back and forth, back and forth. Drowsier and drowsier, your limbs, your body. Your eyelids feel heavier and heavier. You can hardly keep your eyes open. Now you're falling asleep, sleep, sleep. You'll sleep for just a short while, sleep, sleep, and wake up refreshed without any pain. You'll leave this office and return to your home."

Her lashes flickered, brushing the air.

"You'll eat dinner tonight, spend your evening as you usually do and at nine o'clock, when the clock strikes, you'll begin to feel very sleepy, yawning, stretching. You'll stop what you're doing, get up from your chair and go straight to bed."

Her eyes had closed, sealing out the world.

"You'll sleep very deeply, deeper than you've ever slept before."

He hesitated, studying her. She was breathing deeply now and was fast asleep, a contented smile playing about her lips.

"That does it," said Lavinia.

"For now, yes. What about her husband? At nine o'clock when she announces she wants to go to bed, won't he go along?"

"I'll tend to him."

"You'll have to delay him for at least forty minutes. Better an hour, if you can. It's safer if you get him out of the house altogether."

"Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. This is your affair, I'm merely lending a hand. Do you have the money?" The concerned look was replaced by a smile bordering on a leer. "I believe it was five hundred."

Lavinia opened her bag, then closed it. "Tonight, after we're done with her."

"Whatever you say." He scratched his nose and frowned. "See here, I'll need directions to the house and the location of her room."

Lavinia handed him a neatly folded paper. "I've drawn a map. Come up the rear stairs and hide in the armoire or under the bed while she's getting ready for bed. I'll see that the back door is left unlocked. No one will be around."

"As soon as her husband's out of the house, you come up to the bedroom. I may need your help."

"Doctor, I wouldn't miss this for the world!"

"You won't see much." He laughed. "She will, but you and I won't." They turned to look at her. She slept on, a look of complete serenity wreathing her lovely features. Lavinia smoothed the hair back from her forehead.

"What a pretty thing," she murmured. "In a way it's a pity."

"The pain is gone by now. When she wakes up she won't feel a thing."

Lavinia smiled icily. "I wonder what she'll feel to-night."

## XIV

On Dr. Settle's orders, Lisa napped all the way home to Providence. They reached the house late in the afternoon and while Thursby was taking their coats, Lavinia asked her how she was feeling, for the dozenth time since they'd left Westerly.

"I'm fine."

"You look pale. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Perfect, thanks to you and the doctor."

"No thanks to that tea!" She bristled. "If he hadn't insisted I get you right home, I'd have gone back there and given those people a piece of my mind."

"I'm glad you didn't, I'd much rather forget all about it."

"A bunch of poisoners, that's all they are!"

Holding their coats, Thursby eyed Lavinia inquisitively, encouraging her to launch into a lengthy explanation of the incident. Lisa retreated, going upstairs to take a bath. Watching her ascend the stairs and vanish around the corner of the upper hallway, Lavinia stopped talking in mid-explanation—much to Thursby's chagrin—and seizing a candle from the stand in the foyer, she walked out the door.

The sun was lowering, sending bright golden shafts through the woods, felling the trees in imagination. The grass on the distant hills had already yellowed to seed, squirrels scurried about in quest of stocks for their nests, and the field crickets' chorus so loud on the way up from town was gradually diminishing, making way for the insistent clamor of the katydids of night.

Lavinia followed the path in the direction of the oaks, but before they came within sight, she turned off, making her way through a thick tangle of underbrush. The floor



of the woods was already beginning to bed down in new leaves and the scent of moist wood rotting was in the air. A swarm of orange and brown monarch butterflies pattered soundlessly overhead, heading south on the trail of the birds, and a distant crow shrieked defiantly over the song of the wind.

She went on, pushing the bare berry bushes and reddening low-lying sumac aside, arriving at an enormous stone half-buried in the ground and surrounded by trees so thick that the sunlight was all but obscured from view. The ravages of heat and cold had split the stone almost in the center, creating a fissure nearly eighteen inches wide. Lavinia approached it, took out the candle, lit it and slipped inside.

The light sent eerie shadows climbing the interior as she started down a steep grade, her shoes sinking into the soft earth. Small animal and wild turkey bones were scattered about, and the odor of rotting flesh filled the cave so strongly she all but gagged. She pressed forward a few steps then paused, raised the candle high, and peered into the blackness beyond.

A single slanted yellow eye glared malevolently, like a citrine floating. Sighting her, it came forward until the face of a wolf revealed itself, the eye staring curiously, the lids of its opposite number gaping, disclosing the empty socket. The creature was huge, fully six feet long, with bushy, dun-colored hair darkening around the upper part of its face and ears. It bared its fangs, an ominous growl issuing from its throat and a thick thread of saliva dropped to the ground.

Lavinia approached it, kneeling before it and planting the candle in the soft, moist floor began petting the wolf's head and whispering softly to it. It stopped growling, listening obediently as she began rubbing its chest with her free hand. But before she had finished talking, it turned away from her, and, swishing its tail as if to signal an end to the meeting, trotted off into the blackness.

Ross got home from work at six-thirty that evening and Lavinia promptly sat him down in the living room and told him what had happened.

"Can't you sue that disgusting tea shop?"

"You can always sue, Lavinia. Whether or not you win your case depends on a lot of things, the judge, your witnesses, the weight of evidence."

"Your evidence is her stomach! The doctor will testify. She was in agony, she could have died!"

He turned to Lisa; she wore a look of amusement. "That bad?" he asked.

"Scary, for a while, but not really bad. I feel fine now, never better."

"At least you ought to talk to a lawyer," insisted Lavinia. "If only we'd gone somewhere else."

"What I don't understand is that you drank that tea yourself. Why didn't it make you sick?"

"And she drank all of hers," said Lisa. "I had less than half a cup."

"Maybe it wasn't the tea," he said.

Lavinia frowned. "We both had chicken salad sandwiches. Do you suppose it's possible there was something in yours caused it?"

"I don't know what to suppose," said Lisa in a bored tone. "I'd really rather just forget the whole thing."

"You should talk to a lawyer, Ross," said Lavinia.

"Fred Muybridge represents the company. I'll see what he thinks."

"You could sue them for a million dollars!"

Lisa laughed, Ross grinned and Lavinia continued looking as upset as seemed appropriate in one genuinely concerned.

The dinner hour came and went. At fifteen minutes before nine, Lisa, Ross and Cyrus were sitting in the living room discussing the latter's need for milk, when a frightful howling began outside, sending a shiver up Lisa's spine. Lavinia, sitting in the study browsing through a book, came rushing into the room.

"What in heaven's name is that?"

"A wolf," said Ross grimly, slamming his hands to his knees and bouncing up out of his chair. He looked out the window into the moon-drenched night. "Listen to him."

The stable dogs came to life and began baying.

"That's dandy, that is," said Cyrus acidly. "Now we're in for it. That damned critter sits around doing nothing, silent as the grave for six months, then all of a sudden there he is!"

Ross moved to the archway leading to the dining room. "Thursby!"

Thursby came running from the kitchen, donning his jacket and buttoning it as he arrived. "Sir?"

Ross removed a small key from his chain and handed it to him. "Go into the study and get my Browning out of the case, the 406, and a dozen shells."

"You're not going out after it!" exclaimed Lisa. "I wish you wouldn't."

"Lisa, that caterwauling could go on all night and Enos' dogs are no help. I just want to take a look around. If he keeps up, I'll follow the sound and find him. With a little luck, I'll get in a decent shot. There's a full moon tonight, I can't miss if I do spot him. And you, my darling, will wind up with a lovely new stole," he joked.

Thursby returned with the weapon and ammunition and Ross's hunting jacket, and helped him into it.

"I'll be a nervous wreck 'til you get back," said Lisa.

"Be careful," said Lavinia, "please."

"I'll be fine, he's the one to worry about. I've got a big day tomorrow and I'm damned if he's going to keep me awake tonight!"

"Keep him up wind o' you," cautioned Cyrus.

Ross went out, the others watching, Lavinia in concealed amusement. He would track the howling until he got within range. It would stop, he'd thrash about in the brush searching for the beast, and moments later the howling would begin again a quarter-mile away.

His wild wolf chase would go on until he gave up in disgust, at least an hour, maybe longer.

The clock above the fireplace showed three minutes before nine. Lisa, meanwhile, with one ear listening for the sound of the shotgun, went back to trying to persuade Cyrus of his need for milk. His response was continued stubborn refusal to even consider the idea. The clock chimed the hour. The wolf's howling and the dogs' response continued. Lavinia went back to the study, and Lisa yawned and announced that she was going to bed.

"I can't keep my eyes open."

"A little too much excitement for one day," said Cyrus. "Go on up, dear. And don't worry, he'll be back in awhile."

Lavinia came back in moments later. "I think I'll say good night," she said to Cyrus. Looking out the window, she started as the howling resumed. "I hope I can get some sleep."

"Let's hope we all can."

## XV

They stood at the foot of the bed, watching her sleep, a peaceful half-smile on her face, her head turned to show her right profile. Her breathing was deep and steady.

"We'll have to get her into much deeper sleep," said the doctor quietly, "so deep you'll be able to shout in her ear and she won't even stir."

"How do you propose to do that?" asked Lavinia, "hypnosis?"

"No. Hypnosis is no deeper than natural sleep, not as deep usually. Don't worry, I can handle that little problem." He turned to her, the corners of his mouth edging upward slightly and a glint coming into his eyes. "At the moment, there's another problem, though. The money."

Lavinia stared at him coldly. "I told you you'd get it when you're done."

"And I agreed. It's not when, dear lady, it's how much. I've been thinking about it all the way up from Westerly."

"How much?"

"Let's keep it on a fair and friendly basis. Shall we say a thousand?"

"Impossible. I don't have it!"

"You live here in this beautiful house. You wear those lovely expensive clothes."

"I don't have cash. Besides, we agreed on five hundred. Take it or leave it."

Settle had opened his bag, which was at the foot of the bed, but having done so, he closed it again and picking it up started for the door.

"Whatever you say."

"Wait, don't leave, I beg you!" The words hissed through her teeth and she despised herself for saying them, hating even more this smirking skeleton standing before her.

"That's better. Don't upset yourself, my dear, think of it as an investment. You stand to come into a fortune from what I hear. What I'm asking for is a drop in the bucket. Services rendered, and well worth ten times the price. You're lucky I'm not the greedy sort."

"I can't get cash." His face fell. "I have an emerald. It's worth fifteen hundred dollars."

"Get it."

"It's in my room."

"Hurry, we haven't all night. I'm something of an expert on precious stones. Suppose I tell you what it's worth."

"It's worth fifteen hundred! Half again what you're asking."

"If it is, I'll take it *and* the five hundred."

If a knife had been within reach she would have snatched it up and killed him on the spot, the greedy swine, waiting till the last minute to push her into a corner. She left, returning moments later with an emerald solitaire. Snatching it from her, he held it up to the light.

"Twelve hundred, maybe, but no fifteen."

"It's all I have."

He sighed wearily. "Your attitude disappoints me."

"You've got what you want, why can't you get on with it?"

"There's just one more thing."

"What?"

Smiling and placing his fingertips against her cheek, he drew his index finger along her lower lip. "The next time we meet, there'll be a small service you can do me."

"Bastard!"

"Your mouth is fascinating. So warm and comfortable-looking. Your lips."

"All right, all right, anything! Just get started. He won't stay out all night, you know!"

Pocketing the ring, he opened his bag a second time and took out a large volume, laying it unopened at the foot of the bed. Looking on, she felt herself filling with loathing and fear. To think that she was at the mercy of such a disgusting animal!

"*The Assyrian Book of the Dead*. Very useful. Are you familiar with cuneiform writing?"

"I'm really not interested in the details. Will you hurry, please?"

The wolf howled in the distance and the dogs answered.

"If you're in such a rush, you can help," he said in a put-upon tone. "Though I warn you there'll be no rushing her."

He set four black candles at the corners of the bed, lit them and turned Lisa over on her back. Then he took a slender pasteboard box out of his bag, removed the lid and held up a fresh rose. Moistening its petals with a few drops from a small vial, he placed it between Lisa's breasts, the blossom directly under her nostrils.

"She'll inhale it and it will put her into a sleep so deep every organ in her body will all but cease to function. Her heart will beat so faintly only a trained physician will be able to hear it."

"She can't get so deep she'll die, can she?"

"Not if I do what has to be done properly, and I will." Moving back to the foot of the bed, he leafed through the book, finding his place. "All ready. Put out all the lights except the candles at the corners."

Lavinia did so and he began reading aloud, chanting the ten invocations of deriff, one after another, the names of the guardian demons, the colors, the scents. On and on he read, then suddenly closed the book and raising his arms in supplication invoked the powers of the great unholy ones—the chantah and the myrion, the gleese and kormals and viziborns. Finishing, he stepped back."

"Put out the candles, it's starting!" he whispered hoarsely, pulling the covers back all the way, taking care not to disturb the rose in position.

Lavinia extinguished the candles, plunging the room into total darkness. At once, as if actuated by a switch, a soft blue light began emanating from Lisa's body, a shimmering glow surrounding her completely, encasing her in mummylike fashion. Her placid features began to contort, eyes and mouth twitching and presently her body began bloating, as if an unseen hose were inflating it with air. Just as quickly, the air came rushing out of her, collapsing her cheeks, throat and stomach. Again and again it happened, faster, and with rapidly increasing intensity, a rhythmic pumping of her body, her face alternately bloated and sunken, stamped with a look of sheer horror.

"She's having a nightmare," said Lavinia.

Settle chuckled. "A nightmare is having her. A nightmare to end all nightmares, more terrifying than the journey through the ninety doors of hell!"

Her fingers opened and closed, nails digging into her palms. The rush of air from her pulsing body, the glow surrounding it, the look of abject terror on her face persisted as Settle withdrew the flower. The sound of the air escaping her mouth and nostrils was eerie, a prolonged whooshing, like dead air released from a tomb.

"How much longer?" asked Lavinia.

"Don't talk, just watch. She's starting through the veils now, cutting one after another as she goes. The sound of ripping is like shrieking, sheer torture. Look at her face, her eyes! But she's young and strong, she'll make it. It's going beautifully, look, look!"

They continued to watch in silence, Lavinia fascinated, until Lisa's body stopped moving, the blue light enveloping her vanishing, and the contented look of the dreamless sleeper returned. Her flesh had become pale as the sheet and bathed in sweat, the bedclothes beneath her sopping wet.



"She's stopped breathing!" snapped Lavinia. "She's dead!"

He smiled. "She's breathing. She's very much alive, wherever she is."

# **BOOK TWO**

1665

## I

A crudely fashioned bed occupied one corner of the room, beside it a three-legged table, upon which stood a single candle in a copper holder and a leather-jack jug half-filled with water. The narrow room, shaped like a dog's leg from the door to the end, contained only three other pieces of furniture, a stool, a frippery—one of its doors ajar, revealing the drab clothing hanging within—and a chest of drawers against the wall furthest from the door. Above the bed was a double window, its exterior sill lined with clay pots devoid of plants and shoots, save for a clutch of heather in one of them. The window overlooked a small yard two stories below. A dung heap filled one corner of the yard, climbing halfway up a brick wall and from under it a shallow culvert ran adjacent to the building all the way to the street. The street itself was an elongated quagmire dividing the town from one end to the other.

On the stool drawn up to the bed sat a slender, round-shouldered, wispy-haired young woman in a gray dress of linsey-woolsey, and a wrinkled apron. Engrossed in her rosary, thumb and forefinger gripping a bead, she mumbled a paternoster, bobbing her head dutifully at the end of it as if in punctuation, and moved on. From the kitchen below, the odor of boiled cabbage came wafting upward through the cracks in the bare floor. The girl crinkled her nose distastefully, got up and, without pause in her praying, opened the door leading to the stairs. This failed to improve the air, however, and the raucous babble of voices, the singing and shouting coming from the ale house below instantly became so much louder that the occupant of the bed stirred. At once the girl shut the door again. The sleeper sighed,

her lips moving, the steady rhythm of her breathing breaking as she sniffed audibly. Her sleep had been unusually deep, and awakening from it seemed to require visible effort as her face again betrayed reaction to the distasteful odor of the cabbage.

Gradually the gray veil of sleep drawn over her mind gave way to a soft, foglike yellow. It grew brighter and began to hurt her eyes, accelerating the waking process. Inhaling deeply, she almost gagged; then she opened her eyes. The first sight to meet them was that of the low ceiling, cracked, yellow-smudged and covered with water-stains encroaching on one another and leading to a darker stain bordering an inch-wide crack running a jagged course down the wall to the left of the window.

Her hands began inching across the caddow covering the sheet under which she lay. With an effort, she turned her cheek to the pillow and discovered the girl on the stool, her head lowered, her face shadowed and unidentifiable, deeply absorbed in praying. Conscious of being stared at, she slowly lifted her face, revealing wide, pale-blue eyes filled with apprehension, a thin aquiline nose and a mouth with an overlarge lower lip.

Gasping, she dropped her rosary in her lap with a soft clicking sound, starting up from her stool.

"Dear God in heaven, you're alive! Alive! Oh, sweet Blessed Virgin. Miss Janet, Miss Janet!"

Awake now and aware that she was in an unfamiliar room, with a stranger standing over her, the girl in the bed lifted her hands, turning them slowly, examining the palm lines, the shape of her fingers, and the small silver ring on the little finger of her left hand which she had never seen in her life before.

"What—"

"Miss Janet, Miss Janet!" The girl standing over her was suddenly overjoyed, beaming brightly, clasping her hands together and striking her breast. "I knew it, I knew it!"

"Who are you?" asked the other.

"It's Meggo, don't you recognize me?"

"I'm sorry."

"Megan!" Claspings both of the other girl's hands, she helped her up to a sitting position, then pulled the bed-clothes loose from the mattress allowing her to swing her legs out. "Miss Janet, you're well again. You are! You are! Praise be to God!"

"My name is Lisa." She barely got the word out before a wave of fear swept over her and her heart began hammering at her ribs.

Megan laughed and going to the chest of drawers, took down the looking-glass hanging above it, handing it to her.

"The fever's confusing you, dear heart, see for yourself!"

In the glass was a pretty face, striking gray eyes with blonde lashes and brows, impressively high cheekbones, a well-formed nose and full mouth, the lips pale, the complexion extremely fair. The hair piled above the forehead was the color of cornsilk, neatly combed and accented by natural waves.

Lisa froze, her hand going to her throat. Then it crept upward to her cheek and she cried out, the glass slipping from her fingers and shattering on the floor.

"Oh, miss, seven years bad luck!"

"Who are you?"

The other girl reacted confusedly, staring and re-treating a step. "Don't you recognize me? It's Megan O'Donaugh. Meggo."

Lisa's fingers found her forehead and she swayed slightly.

"Sit down, please," she said, "don't be afraid."

Meggo obliged, gaping fixedly, her eyes a blend of puzzlement and fear.

"Your voice, it's different." Bending over, she carefully picked up the shards.

"Where am I, what is this place?"

"The Cock and Fiddle, of course. This is your room."

"Where, what town?"

"In Blyth, where else?" Meggo's bewilderment seemed on the verge of giving way to amusement, as if she were slowly coming around to believing she was being made the butt of a joke.

"Northumberland," said Lisa quietly, "and the Cock and Fiddle?"

"The inn that was left to you and your brother, Mr. Simon, by your father." She smiled indulgently. "It's your illness, ain't it? it's affected your brain."

"What illness, tell me?"

"Aw, now you're pulling my leg, you are. You've lain here a week come Wednesday, hovering between life and death." She studied her with a despairing look. "You really don't remember, do you?"

"Tell me everything that's happened to me, from the beginning."

"Well, let me see, you took ill of a Thursday night. I knew that day would be a bad one for you, that mangy black cat crossing your path."

"Go on."

"Well, when you were no better the morning after, Mr. Simon called the doctor. He came up and looked at you and told us your humors were out of balance, your phlegm and your choler. Then he bled you and went away. But you still got no better and fell asleep and stayed asleep and a fever came over you so that you sweat, oh mercy, how you sweat, the bedclothes were wringing wet! And when you woke up at last, I tried giving you a bit o' pigeon broth, but you wouldn't swallow it. All I could get you to take was the China drink. Then about Saturday you began getting all swollen in your neck and throat, which was why you couldn't swallow. The swelling finally went down last night and you took broth, but you were only half-awake. Then this morning, even though the swelling was gone and you were breathing easier, I thought for certain you were dying. You lay there like a stone. I couldn't wake you

even with pinching your cheeks. I was so worried I was sick myself.

"Between times the doctor came twice more and told Mr. Simon there was nothing he could do for you and that we should prepare for you to die, get a winding sheet and all. But you're alive, and you look fair marvelous! The Blessed Virgin heard my prayers!"

"Megan?"

"Your voice, it's so different; I can't get over it!"

"Please listen, I'm not Janet."

"Your face—"

There was little point in trying to persuade Megan, Meggo, of the truth of her denial, and even less in attempting to explain. At that, what explanation was there? She herself had no idea what had happened. She had gone to bed, fallen asleep almost at once, the series of awful nightmares had begun and now she had awakened to find herself in one that threatened to be the most horrifying of all, from which there promised no awakening . . .

She began trembling, her breath coming faster. The room whirled and she lay back down.

"Are you all right, miss?"

"There's something terribly wrong, Meggo, hideously wrong! You keep calling me Janet."

"Janet Stiles, yes."

"My name is not Janet Stiles!"

She tried to explain, half-heartedly at first, with little hope that the girl would even understand what she was saying, let alone accept it. But to her surprise, as she continued talking, Meggo began nodding her head slowly.

"Witchcraft!"

"I don't think so. I don't know what it is. But somehow, through some crazy quirk of nature I went to sleep and now I wake up in this." She paused, spread her fingers and gingerly touched her body.

"Your face is hers, but not your voice. Nor your eyes

either. They're her color eyes, but they look different."

"How different?"

"Too serious. Hers always danced. Besides, there's what happened at Findhorn up by the Moray Firth. You must have heard—"

"Go on."

"That man who died in a fall and was buried and a week later was seen walking about. And with his neck all twisted where he'd broken it in the fall. They dug up his grave and sure enough it was empty. Still, when they asked him, he couldn't say what had happened." She stopped short. "But if you're her now, where is she?"

"I don't know, I can't begin to understand any of this."

"Gone beyond the pale, that's where she is!" Meggo crossed herself and snatched her beads up off the bed.

"The nightmares are part of it." Lisa was thinking aloud. "They were horrible!"

"Tell me."

"I was lying on sand, a desert. It must have been, except the sand was gray. Everything was gray as far as the eye could see. The wind was howling and suddenly I was lifted upward and carried away, as if a giant hand were seizing me. Below I could see towers, buildings—cottages, manor houses, churches, but all with their windows sealed. Solid gray, no glass, and as I looked down at them they began to melt, almost as if my looking caused it. Then it all changed; there were mountains and seas, enormous waves with great black clouds hanging overhead. Then everything gradually turned red as fire. The heat was sheer torture, like being burnt at the stake. I heard a great roaring sound, so loud my ears began gushing blood. I tried to block them, but I couldn't lift my hands. I couldn't move a finger! Then suddenly there was this great wall in front of me. I was going to crash headlong into it, but when my head touched it it wasn't a wall, it was a curtain and it ripped, a horrible sound



rising above the roar, like a living thing screaming, echoing down the sky!

"There were more curtains, and when I ripped through the color would change. There were all the colors of the rainbow and everything melting below me, cities, mountains, forests. Then the people, more like demons really, hideous-looking creatures, naked and sweating, reaching up for me. They had hooks instead of hands, catching my flesh, tearing it. It was agony, but as they stripped it off, more grew in its place. I was bathed in blood. Then these little silver flying things, like bats, only smaller, came shooting out of nowhere into my nose and ears, ripping me inside. I vomited blood. The curtains, the fire, those disgusting creatures, the excruciating pain, the blood, the shrieking. I felt as if my brain would explode, and my body with it! I died a hundred times, Meggo. Then came the blackness, one huge cloud blocking out everything and swallowing me, smothering me. The awful sounds began fading and then nothingness, no sounds, nothing to see, no movement, no feelings of any sort."

Meggo crossed herself again. "Jesus bless you, you poor darling. But it's over, you're all right."

"Am I?"

"You look starved."

"I feel as if I haven't eaten in a week."

"There's cabbage, and I'll see what else. I'll only be a minute; you lie back and rest."

## II

There was green sauce and calf's head and bacon. And a bit of crammed-up capon, as Megan called it. She also bought a tankard of ale, warm and bubbling and so strong it set Lisa's teeth on edge. None of the food was particularly appetizing, but she was so famished she forced herself to eat without smelling the cabbage or the calf's head and soon felt strong enough to get up and walk about the room.

She dressed, selecting things from the frippery, a shift, an apron and a pair of corked shoes, worn at the heels but comfortable. But then, she mused, as she tried them out, why shouldn't they be comfortable? Why shouldn't everything fit her perfectly?

The two of them talked. The year, Lisa learned, was 1665, early in April. Meggo uncertain as to the exact date. Somewhat sheepishly she confessed that she could neither read nor write. She did not even know how old she was.

"But I know my birthday. It's the same day the king was beheaded."

"Charles I."

"Him, yes."

"If I recall my history, that was in January, 1649."

"The thirtieth. I know for certain it's 1665 now, I remember New Year's Eve downstairs. I'll never forget it," she added ruefully.

"And what made it so memorable?"

"I'm ashamed to tell of it. I was raped."

"No!"

"Oh, yes." She sighed. "Not the first time, I'm sorry to say. Still it's not rape anymore for me. I just let them do what they want."

"Who?"

"The gentlemen guests, of course. Mr. Simon says I must. There's four of us and we all must."

"Mr. Simon sounds like a fine specimen of humanity. You shouldn't permit it, Meggo. You shouldn't lower yourself."

"It's do it or have your clothes torn off and be pummeled about and then be used."

"Disgusting animals! Why do you stay here? Why not run away?"

"Where would I run to? I've no money, no relatives or friends."

"What about your parents?"

"My mother died of the pox and my father was killed in London in an accident in the street. We were living at Gardenstairs. My father was a soldier, then a cooper. That's how I know about the king. He took a barge every day where we lived, so my father told me, and they took him one day and cut off his head. My birthday."

"Knowing it was 1649, maybe we can figure out how old you are."

"Can you?"

"When they executed Charles, you must have been what, three, four?"

"Younger, no more than a year. I know because I remember Father telling me I was too young to understand at the time."

"Let's say a year. That would make you about seventeen now."

"Oh, it must be more than that, years more."

"It only seems so, dear. Have you never tried to run away?"

"Once, but I didn't even leave town. I was frightened. There's just no place to run. If I went back to London I'd starve to death. Here at least there's enough to eat, a roof over my head and a warm bed."

"How did you ever get all the way up here? It must be more than three hundred miles from London."

"I was working for an invalid lady and I had to clean up her body every day. She was kind to me, but it was filthy work, disgusting. I hated it. Still, I ought to have stayed. I was too young to know any better. I started north. I had an uncle here, Samuel Bothwell by name, but when I got here I found he'd died. I had no more money, but you—Janet, I mean, found me and took me in, bless her kind heart."

"You two were very close."

"Best friends."

"We can be best friends, Meggo. We should be, we'll need each other."

"Yes." She studied Lisa. "You're looking much better."

"I feel all right, confused and full up with desperation, but almost over the shock of it. And thanks to you I don't feel weak anymore."

"You're alive, that's the main thing. No matter how bad it gets you're better off than dead. But tell me about before you went to sleep. Where did you live?"

The door which Meggo had left ajar opened suddenly. A heavy-set, big-shouldered man in his late twenties, face bloated, eyes small and darting about, measured Meggo with a look of impatience, then, seeing Lisa, broke into a grin.

"Well, what's this? All better are we? Cured and up and about?" Coming in, he took hold of both her hands and drew her to him. "Netty, my darling dear, you look splendid. How do you feel?"

"Fine."

Meggo retreated. "I'll get back downstairs," she said. He nodded. "You do that. There's a coach full coming in. They'll be thirsty as Turks." He sat Lisa down on the edge of the bed and took the stool himself. "We've all missed you, darling dear. We'd given you up for lost. Such a pleasant surprise. It's no easy thing trying to manage this dump pile without you. In just the week you should see how prices have gone up. The

thieving farmer bastards are demanding four shillings for a hundred eggs. Sack is up to seven shillings the gallon and the rains have slowed business down to a crawl."

As he rambled on, he let go of her and slipped one hand down inside her shift seizing her right breast. Startled, she tried to jerk free and unable to, brought her face down, sinking her teeth into his forearm.

"Ow! Why, you mangy bitch!"

Down came his other hand, slapping her loudly across the face. The pain was like fire shooting through her head and in the next instant he had her down on the bed, his hot breath in her face, his hand fumbling at his breeches, unstringing them. She swore and grabbed for his cheek, her nails digging into the flesh just under the eye. But wrenching free and jamming his hand against her throat, he began pressing, cutting off her wind. She struggled to breathe, and tried to break free, but he was too strong. She was beginning to lose consciousness when he released her throat. Choking, she gasped loudly, gulping for breath.

His fingers were like white fire as he fumbled at her thighs. A tremor passed through her body and nausea seized the pit of her stomach. Eyes riveted to his, she hissed and spat in his face. But he only laughed.

And he was still laughing as he mounted her, as stark, unreasoning terror engulfed her. Too exhausted to resist, she ceased her feeble struggling.

### III

She stood at the window looking out at the setting sun spreading its fire across the horizon, welding heaven and earth. Recollection of his taunting laughter, his rough, callused hands gripping her arms and breasts, fumbling in her most intimate areas, his strength and his weight pinning her to the bed as he drove his member into her made her wince in shame and humiliation. All too vividly she understood now the plight of Meggo and the other girls. Along with waiting on the guests hand and foot, they could expect to be brutalized, beaten and flung aside by one drunken sot after another.

Simon Stiles, her own "brother," as sober as a parson, seizing and abusing her with an air of detachment that had him all but yawning. It was a daily ritual, no doubt, a brief romp to confirm the closeness of the family. Great God in heaven!

She would run away, of course. The sooner the better. Or risk more of the same. No risk about it, it was as certain as sunrise. If not him, someone else. Looking down at the yard, she pondered her situation. Without money she wouldn't get six miles, and she didn't have a farthing. And where would she go if she did? To Mansfield, she hoped, notwithstanding the fact that it was halfway to London. Once arrived she might locate one of her ancestors, an Allworth or a Pinckney—someone from her mother's side. Such a possibility was despairingly remote, however. Here she was back almost two hundred years. Who could say if either family had even been begun or if so, anyone was living in Mansfield at the time?

A hundred and eighty-five years, to be precise. How

in God's name had it happened? Why? By design, or by accident? If design, who was responsible? Who could have conceived and brought about such a diabolical thing?

Confusion flooded her mind. She must keep her wits about her. Keep a grip on common sense, live one day at a time and work toward a single goal. *Find the way to return!* There was one optimistic note; she could assume that having been thrust back in time she might as easily be thrust forward. Didn't one logically lead to the other? Or was any semblance of logic in a situation as bizarre as this too much to hope for?

One thing she could certainly count on, however. Ross would wait for her. Their love was the tie that bound them, now and forever. Nothing in heaven or hell or between could sever that tie. Like all nightmares, this one would find its way to an ending, to completion. His arms would be waiting to welcome her, the warmth of his smile, the fire of his kisses.

A tear started in her eye, blurring sight of the sun. Turning from the window, she touched her eye with the hem of her apron.

*Ross, Ross, I love you, my darling.*

Broad shadows, the probing fingers of the night to come, had begun to steal across the rut-laced street at the top of the yard when a tired knock sounded at the door and Meggo appeared.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes. Come in and close it. I'm glad you've come. We've got to leave this terrible place, at once!"

"We can't do that. Mr. Simon will come after us. He has a gun."

"The devil take him and his gun. We're going to Mansfield. There must be a coach."

"There's one to Teesside. We might get one from there heading south."

"Have you any money?"

"Two or three bob."

"That's not enough. We'll need eight or ten pounds at least, for the coach, for food and a place to sleep on the way. Can you get any money?"

Meggo shook her head. "There's none of us has more than a few coins. Tip money."

"What about all the money he takes in?"

"He keeps it in a box." She measured it with her hands. "It's iron, with a big lock."

"Locks can be broken. Where's the box?"

"Under his bed."

"Can you get it?"

Meggo gasped and bit her lower lip. "It's too heavy; besides I don't dare."

"I'll get it. Where's his room?"

"Down the hall two doors, but he keeps it locked."

"Get the key."

"Not now, surely. He's in and out of there."

"When, then?"

"I'm afraid, miss."

"Neither of us can afford that luxury, Meggo. When does he generally get drunk, what time?"

"Not 'til after ten. The key's in the bedstone sack, hanging by the kitchen stove."

"So get it and bring it to me. Wait a minute. Is there a coach out of here after ten?"

"Not till sunup. They don't drive at night because of the highwaymen."

"All right, I'll wait until just before dawn before I go in and take the money."

"But he'll be in bed!"

"As drunk as a lord. A mortar in the ear wouldn't wake him. Get it through your head, dear. You and I are leaving here for good. And not he nor his friends nor his gun nor anything else is going to stop us. You get me that key and I'll do the rest!"



## IV

She took supper in her room, a cold joint, a bit of marrowbone soup, hot and surprisingly tasty, and a florentine. At nine o'clock, when the din below stairs was at its loudest, she bolted her door, undressed and got into bed, loathing the feel of the mattress beneath her in recollection of what had happened there hours earlier.

She set the clock of her mind at four in the morning, a half-hour before sunrise. She would get up and get ready, Meggo would come with the key, she'd send her down to hold the coach for them and go to Simon's room.

Lying staring at the ceiling, she found herself wondering for the third time how much she'd find in the box. Forty pounds, fifty, sixty?

A knock.

"Yes?"

"It's me, sister dear."

"What do you want?"

"Open up."

"I'm trying to sleep."

"Open the door or I'll kick it in, damn you!"

Her heart sank. Getting up and drawing the caddow around her naked body, she unfastened the bolt. The door eased open. By the flickering light of the wall sconce out of sight down the hall, she could make out Simon and three other men standing behind him. One was short and enormously fat, with pink skin, heavily veined on and around his nose, and a tongue too large for his wet and flaccid mouth. Beside him stood a younger man of medium height, his pleasant face, his cheeks and

chin framed beneath his hat by muttonchops and a beard. The third man's face was indistinguishable, standing as he was in the shadow of his bearded companion.

"What is it, Simon?"

"Here, here, darling dear, it's some gentlemen come to call."

"She's lovely," murmured the fat one, sucking in his breath and wetting his lips. "I'm first."

Lisa blanched and stepping back, tried to slam the door, but Simon's foot blocked it and his hand came down on her shoulder, gripping it hard.

"Now, now, now, let's be hospitable, shall we? Gentlemen, her name is Netty, she's clean and healthy on my word of honor, and she's eager as can be to please you. But I remind you, she's my only flesh and blood and very dear to me and you're not to manhandle her. No pinching or pummeling. That'll be two shillings per man, in advance, if you don't mind."

"You said one bob," began the man in the shadow.

The bearded one waved away the protest. "Relax, Bob, she looks to be well worth it."

She backed away in an agony of dread and desperation as they paid and came barging in, leaving Simon in the doorway leering and waving at her.

Steeling herself, fighting down the panic rising to her throat, she began pleading. But the fat man waved away her protest and gripping the corner of the caddow, tore it off her. Behind him she could see the bearded one shut and bolt the door and begin removing his coat. The third man, whose face had been unrecognizable in the doorway, showed pox patches around his mouth and a livid scar under his left ear. He quickly moved behind her, and, with his cold hands on her shoulders and sliding down her arms, pushed her down upon the bed.

She began fighting them, her arms flailing, kicking vigorously, shrieking at the top of her lungs, until the

fat man—who by now had lowered his breeches—began swearing and seizing the pillow, covered her face with it.

Moaning softly in defeat under the gaze of the quarter-moon framed by the window, she stopped struggling and surrendered and in the close darkness of the little room, the most heartless and insidious torment she had ever known, could ever have conceived of, took complete and total possession of her. Not a word was spoken, not a whisper. The only sounds were those of physical exertion, the movement of bodies, limbs and hips and shoulders, then the familiar moist sounds of lips smacking in satisfaction and one mouth after another sucking the most tender, the most intimate areas of her helpless body. The pain of sudden entry gave way to a numbing ache which in turn yielded to a languid feeling of no feeling at all, as if in her desperation she somehow managed to turn off all her senses.

How long they ravaged her, how many times she was violated and abused in every conceivable way she had no idea, nor in time did she care. She breathed, she could see the sliver of moon and the outline of their heads and shoulders as again and again they came down upon her, but she lay as if dead, in body, in spirit.

After what seemed eons, they tired of their play and withdrew one at a time, still without a word, as if in the aftermath of their conquest something akin to shame or misgiving touched their consciousnesses. The door closed and she was alone, shuddering, sobbing softly, tears rolling down her temples to the pillow, but so completely exhausted unable to reach for the caddow to pull it over her body.

Mercifully, sleep came. She woke up once during the hours that followed, trembling in fear, her body drenched with nervous perspiration, crying aloud, pleading with them to leave her alone. Then she drifted back into troubled sleep, whispering Ross's name over and over,

as if in the hope that its presence on her lips would help restore the strength she would need to do what had to be done very soon.

Meggo woke her, smoothing her hair back and whispering her name softly. She sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes with the backs of her hands.

"The key's gone." whispered Meggo. "He took it and kept it."

"That's all right. He probably hasn't locked the door."

"Are you all right? You sound funny."

"I'm all right." Her eyes were getting used to the darkness. "You're all dressed, good. Where will the coach be?"

"In Shore Point Road, six doors up the street as you go out the front. To your left. God be with you, and do be careful."

"Don't worry. Go along now."

Meggo hesitated, leaned over and kissed her on the cheek and went out. Lisa got up, dressed and, easing the door open slowly, started down the hall. The candle in the wall sconce was burnt down to the nub, flickering, struggling to stay alive as she reached the door to Simon's room. Gripping the latch, she turned it slowly.

He lay, fully clothed, on top of the bed, snoring lustily, one hand hanging over the side almost touching the floor. Getting down on all fours, she felt for the box, found it and pulled it slowly out from underneath. It was bigger than Meggo had described it and, she decided, much too heavy to carry. Sliding it across the floor and out into the hall where she could work on the lock appeared far too risky, so looking about she settled on the coal tongs in their bucket. Thrusting one tong through the shackle of the lock, she pulled the tong upward with all her strength. The shackle snapped, the lock clattering to the floor. At once, Simon was up on one elbow, eyes gaping at her.

"What the hell are you doing?" he roared, and started scrambling to his feet.

Shooting up, she raised the tongs high, bringing them down on his head with a sickening thud. His jaw sagged, his eyes snapped upward showing the whites, he slumped to his knees and pitched forward on his face.

## V

Stooping down, Lavinia unlocked the bottom drawer of the highboy alongside the window overlooking the moon-drenched rose garden. Pulling open the drawer, she took out a small flat case, opening it and unwrapping the silk neatly folded inside. It covered a small hand mirror, its wooden handle connected to the glass by the carved likeness of a woman's face with long, hornlike projections, their points turned downward spreading left and right between the top of the head and the base of the mirror. It was a replica of the mirror of the Egyptian goddess Hathor.

Taking out its small wooden stand, which had been lying beside the mirror case, she polished the glass with the silk and placed it carefully on the stand. She then lit a small shallow cup of incense, the rose-scented fumes rising and spreading throughout the room. Finally, to the left and to the right of the mirror, she placed two slender orange candles. Lighting them, she then extinguished the lamp atop the highboy and sat down before the mirror, taking care to place herself so that she would be looking across it at an angle.

"Great Goddess of Wisdom, Nourishment and Protection, with this thy mirror, I would scry. With thine assistance I would probe the regions of timelessness and the events of the future. Grant me in Ledion's name the wisdom to interpret what I see."

A knock sounded at the door. "Lavinia! Lavinia!" It was Ross. "Open the door, hurry!"

Blowing out the candles, and shoving both mirror and stand into the top drawer, she snatched up her peignoir and hurrying to the door, unlocked it.

"Come, quick. It's Lisa." His face was ashen and his

hand trembled as it grasped her shoulder. "Oh, God. I think she's dead!"

"Go wake up Hedridge. Hurry."

He nodded and went away and she finished tying the bows of her peignoir, smiled, and walked down the hall to the master bedroom.

Lisa lay just as she and Settle had left her, as still as death, no movement whatsoever of the bedclothes covering her and tucked in tightly on either side. Her flesh looked waxen, her cheeks and lips drained of color, but when Lavinia gently opened one eye, it did not show the white.

She stepped backward as Ross and Nellie Hedridge came into the room.

"I think her heart's given out!" exclaimed Ross, his tone tinged with fear.

"She's not dead," said Lavinia flatly.

Hope flooded his face. Hedridge leaned over the bed opposite Lavinia and examined Lisa's eye. "She's alive, barely."

"Thank God, can you do something?"

"I'll get some smelling salts."

"I'll go," said Lavinia. "Where are they?"

"The drawer in the bedstand in my room, on the right. Ross, you must send for Dr. Craven at once."

"I'll go myself."

"Ride like the wind. She's alive, poor dear, but for how much longer heaven only knows."

## VI

Alexander Craven was one of those overworked, confusion-laden members of his craft who frequently consulted his gods of inner wisdom for guidance. And when doing so, he chose to ignore questions from all sides in a manner suggesting that those who asked them were not even present.

Having finished his examination of Lisa, he straightened up, plunging immediately into deep thought, scratching his chin aimlessly and crinkling the corners of his eyes behind his spectacles. His ruminating corrugated his brow, filled his eyes with concern, and caused him to purse his lips to a fraction of their normal size.

Lavinia, Ross, Hedridge and Thursby stood staring at him in varying stages of impatience, waiting for articulation of his thoughts. Once he cleared his throat. All four leaned forward expectantly, but no words were forthcoming.

"For God's sakes, Alex!" Ross burst out. "Say something! What is it?"

"I have no idea. I only know she's not dead. Her eyes—and the mirror fogging, even as slightly as it did when I held it to her lips, proves she's alive. She seems to be hovering between life and death."

"Threatening to slip over the edge any second."

Lavinia began crying loudly, shaking her head, wringing her hands. "It's my fault, all my fault!" Craven stared at her. "It's the poison, it must be!"

"What's she talking about?" asked the doctor.

Lavinia explained in halting tones, tears filling her eyes and streaming down her cheeks. Craven heard her out and shrugged.

"Who can say? It's possible it might be poison affect-



ing the nervous system, but the delay between, what—two o'clock this afternoon and now? That's much too long. I can't believe it would enter her body, give her that stomach ache, then lie dormant for a good eight hours only to start up again with this result."

"You can't believe," began Ross tightly, "but can you say unequivocally that it's impossible?"

"Of course not."

"If we'd never gone near that terrible place; if we'd never gone to Westerly this wouldn't have happened. Blame me, I did it!" She began sobbing uncontrollably. Ross turned to Hedridge. "Take her down to her room and try and calm her down."

They went out. Craven moved to the window, looking out at the night and a tree branch scratching the face of the moon.

"I've been a doctor for nearly forty years and I've never seen anything quite like this. But as far as that tea being poisoned, or something that she's eaten—" He turned to Ross. "It doesn't look like poison to me. I only wish I could tell you what it does look like."

"But you can't."

"I'd be guessing."

"Guess."

"I say something in her brain has gone haywire and it's affecting the central nervous system." Returning to her bed he began examining her head, studying it from every angle. "Has she had a fall lately, anything where she hit her head?"

"No."

"It's like a coma."

"Can't poison cause coma?"

"Alcohol or narcotic poisoning, yes, but generally only after prolonged assimilation. One would have to be an addict to suffer narcotic poisoning that ends up in coma." He paused, his face darkening.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Say it!"

"Cerebral hemorrhage."

"Good God!"

"On second thought she's much too young. Forget I said it." He stared at her. "It's the depth, the intensity of the thing that worries me most."

"You mean she looks more dead than alive? Say it."

"It almost appears she's—left her body. I can barely distinguish heartbeat. If it wasn't for her eyes and the mirror—"

"Isn't there anything you can do? Can't you think of something?"

"You say you've tried smelling salts. Perhaps something stronger." He thought a moment. "No, that might be playing with fire."

"Your confidence is even more reassuring than your diagnosis," said Ross stonily.

"Ross, what would you have me do, lie? Put on a great show of knowledge? Pretend I can put my finger on it just like that? Prescribe for it, snap my bag shut and walk out the door spouting reassurances that she'll be right as rain by morning? I don't know what it is! I've never seen anything like it before. All I can do is consult with other doctors and try to pin down the cause, then, I hope, a cure. In the meantime, she's not to be moved, not to be touched. We'll forget stimulants altogether, at least for the present. See that she gets fresh air and—" Pausing, he thought again. "Wet her lips with clear water every hour or so. Beyond that, all I can think of is prayer."

"All right, all right!" Ross sighed and shook his head resignedly. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid people look for miracles when they're needed. They expect them. I'm only human."

"Something we have in common. It may not be any consolation, but this is all very frustrating for me. I've never felt this helpless, this useless before in my life. Still,

this much I can tell you, I seriously doubt if she's going to get any worse."

"How can you say that?"

Craven took out his watch. "I've been here almost one hour." Again he placed his mirror close to her lips, held it there for a few seconds and showed it to Ross. "Her condition hasn't changed one whit. I say she'll remain stable. I'll get right to work on it. I enjoy waking my associates up in the middle of the night. You, my boy, can help."

"How?"

"Keep your head and your hopes up, and do your utmost to convince poor Lavinia that she's not responsible. If she keeps insisting she is, her conscience may push her off the deep end. One patient at a time in this house is enough. Not counting Cyrus, that is."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, very important. Don't attempt to wake up your wife. And don't let anyone else try to. At the moment, she's holding her own. Let's keep it that way and work from there. Good night, Ross."

## VII

Its seats suspended from leather corner straps, the coach bounced and jounced with every rut in the road. It was a spine-jarring journey that had Lisa and the other passengers up off their seats as much as on them. Less than ten miles out of Blyth, her back began aching and her kidneys felt as if they had turned upside down inside her. But there was more on her mind than the discomfort of the ride.

At the rate of eight miles an hour, counting stops, they would be all day getting to Teesside. Still, the driver had assured them they would reach there before nightfall. No sooner had they boarded and taken their seats than Meggo began regaling Lisa and the other passengers with tales of the joys of stagecoach travel in the outlying parts of the realm.

"The highwaymen take everything you own! They rape the women and sometimes shoot them down in cold blood. There was a lady from Gatehead; one demanded she give him her wedding ring, but she refused and swallowed it instead. What do you think he did?"

The other two passengers seated across from them, an elderly white-wigged gentleman half dozing against his hands balanced atop his walking stick and the pretty young woman beside him whose features resembled his, leaned forward expectantly.

"I'm not the least bit interested," said Lisa.

"He shot her through the head, then cut her belly open and took out the ring!"

The girl gasped, the old man blanched and growled, licking his lips nervously and taking firm hold of his stick.

"It happened," persisted Meggo, "it did. Another man, a parson from Ambleside was in a coach that was stopped and he refused to hand over his purse and one of them cut off his ears, his nose and his lips!"

"Meggo, is there a daily coach from Teesside south?"

"There's one to Hull twice the week," said the girl across from Lisa. "It leaves tomorrow morning from Coal Street down by the water. But you must get there early, there's always more passengers than space."

Lisa thanked her. As the morning wore on and the sun climbed the sky, she managed to change Meggo's subject to one of more importance, specifically where they might stay over in Teesside. When the old man and the other girl dozed off, Lisa began telling Meggo what had happened in Simon's room.

"I tell you I killed him. I know I did!"

"Ssssh. You never. He's as strong as an ox; I've seen him crush a copper tankard with one bare hand. And his head's as thick as a brick. How much was in the box?"

"I don't know. I just snatched up what I could and got out of there as fast as I could."

"How much do you think you got?"

"Eleven or twelve pounds, enough to take us clear to Land's End, if we like. Which isn't the worst idea."

"Bother that," said Meggo, shifting her weight with a grimace.

"I mean they'll be after us, after me for murder."

"Stop talking murder, please, you give me the tremors! You're right, though. He'll be after us for taking his money."

"We'll just have to keep changing coaches and hope we throw him off the track. God help us if you told anybody we're heading for Mansfield!"

"Why should I do that?" She smiled. "You know

something, you not taking all the money was smart. Half of it's yours to start with, you owning half the Cock."

"I wasn't thinking about that at the time."

Meggo pointed at Lisa's cheek. Overnight, it had swollen where Simon had slapped her. "Does it hurt?"

"Just enough to remind me of him and what'll happen if he is alive and catches up with us. The more miles we put between us and Blyth, the better our chances."

The coach rumbled on through the sunny day, the fields green with spring dotted yellow here and there with buttercups and cowslips and splashed with the reds and whites and purples of other wildflowers. The view lifted Lisa's spirits. To be free of the Cock and Fiddle, away from him and his gentlemen guests and on the way to Mansfield was all the tonic she needed. Memory of his ravishing her and the loathsome episode that had followed would fade, she knew. She must not look back. The future, tomorrow, next week, all the time that lay ahead would be better. It had to be. She'd make it so.

Somehow she'd work things out in Mansfield, find the key to what had happened and put in motion the machinery that would get her back to Ross.

Teesside lay across the Tees, which rose on the eastward slope of the Cross Fell in the Pennines and followed the valley down to the North Sea. The land turned bleak long before they came within sight of the river and the town beyond, the hills rising to sharp peaks and the moors separating them in desolate grandeur. When the river showed itself in the distance directly ahead, the scenery became less forbidding, trees and meadows reappearing and within the hour, shortly before the sun set, they crossed the bridge into the city.

It was much larger than Blyth, almost ten times the size, a thriving port at the mouth of the Tees to which ships came from distant Norway, Denmark and Germany. They took a corner room at the Three Thistles in Armstead Road. It was small, with a low ceiling fitted with slender beams, but comfortably furnished and the windows flanking the corner looked out on the harbor lined with sailing ships of every size and description. At first sight, the comparison with New York harbor was inevitable in Lisa's mind. The ships of the mid-nineteenth century were twice and three times the size of the largest of these, but the activity in and around the docks appeared just as lively.

They ate a tolerably good dinner in their room—boiled mutton, oyster pie, cheese, and chocolate with Spanish nuts—and retired early to bounce a second time down the road from Blyth in their imaginations before dropping off to sleep.

Luck was theirs the following morning. They found space on board a double-team coach leaving at six o'clock sharp for Hull, a distance of eighty miles over roads which, the driver emphatically assured them, were much better than those southward from Blyth. The long day's drive was uneventful, the coach reaching Hull shortly after nightfall. However, as Lisa pointed out to Meggo, it would take an additional three days to bisect West Riding laterally, reach Wakefield and from there head southward into Nottingham to get to Mansfield.

Two days later they were crossing the Nottingham border in a driving rain, rounding a turn in the road and approaching a lop-sided sign post which confirmed the imminence of their destination when the team stopped abruptly, throwing the passengers facing the driver into the three sitting opposite them.

The cause of the sudden stop was a pile of wood

in the middle of the road. The ditches on either side were so deep and the road itself so narrow it was impossible to detour around the obstruction. But before the driver and the four men in the coach could even begin discussing a solution to the problem out of the woods alongside the road came three masked men on horseback, brandishing pistols and yelling, sending a chill lancing down Lisa's spine. Leaping the ditch and dismounting, they ordered the driver down, the door opened and the passengers out.

"Quick step! Last one down gets his face shot off!"

Lisa groaned aloud as visions of the money taken from Simon's strongbox vanishing like smoke flashed across her mind. She had divided it evenly between a purse in her reticule and the inside pocket of Meggo's valise, but it was obviously too late now to find a safer hiding place for either half.

The outlaw who had threatened them brought his masked face up to the window and tipped his hat with a flourish, the rain spattering his bald head.

"You too, ladies."

The six of them were ordered to form a line parallel to the ditch and turn out their pockets and purses. The rain continued its steady downpour, a small torrent rushing down the ditch as the highway-men, standing with their backs to it, continued to shout threats and wave their weapons menacingly. Out of the corner of her eye, Lisa could see that Meggo was as white as a sheet, trembling and biting her lower lip. She herself was rigid with fear, but double damned if she'd show it to these three! They filled a hat with money and valuables, taking more than four hundred pounds from a well-dressed young man with a flowing black moustache, a French accent and all-too-obvious difficulty controlling his frustration.

The four men were then ordered to work to remove the log obstruction, after which they climbed back into the coach.



"You've got our money. Can't we leave, too?" asked Lisa pointedly.

"Here now," said the leader of the gang, "what sort of gentlemen would rob two lovely ladies like yourselves and not show them a bit o' hospitality in return?"

"We can do very well without your hospitality!" Lisa glared at him. "Pigs!"

He laughed too loudly. "You maybe can, but you're not about to! All right, lads, mount up and haul these two bitches up behind."

The shorter of the two others suddenly reached for Meggo, ripping the front of her blouse, exposing her breast. But at that moment, a deafening roar split the air and all three outlaws tumbled down into the ditch dead. Turning, Lisa saw the young Frenchman in the window holding two smoking pistols and one of the other men opposite him holding one, both grinning in triumph.

The three shots in one were so loud they startled the outlaws' horses, sending them leaping over the ditch and galloping off into the woods. Within seconds, the money and valuables were recovered, Lisa and Meggo helped back into the coach, and away it went, leaving the three corpses in the ditch. Squeezing water out of the cuffs of his jacket, the young man introduced himself as Rene Etienne Devereaux. "A salesman of small arms from Bordeaux." He smiled, his eyes twinkling. "I shall be able to report to my superiors that our new pistol is extremely effective at short range."

It developed that his stock of samples, four pistols in all, were kept unloaded in a Moroccan leather case, which, when the outlaws appeared, he had had the presence of mind to drop on the floor and kick back under the seat. And after the robbery, when all three were occupied with Lisa and Meggo, he and the other man had hastily loaded the pistols and fired.

The narrow escape left Lisa somewhat shaken. Meggo's dress was temporarily repaired with a pin,

volunteered by a gentleman of business from Edinburgh, and soon the rain let up and the travelers came within sight of Sherwood Forest to the west.

According to one of the men familiar with the area, Mansfield lay only ten minutes ahead. This news, and the welcome prospect of getting out of a coach for the last time—for, she hoped, a long time—were to some degree offset in Lisa's mind by a consideration she had previously given little thought to.

Analyzing her situation objectively, she saw clearly that Mansfield, other than a change in scenery and a welcome distance from Simon Stiles, could hardly be depended upon to provide a solution to her dilemma.

Meggo had accepted her incredible explanation for her presence in Janet Stiles's body, because she had known the real Janet and recognized the differences between Lisa and her. Meggo was superstitious, as well. Such individuals invariably preferred the bizarre and the miraculous to matter-of-fact explanations. This would not be the case with any ancestors Lisa might encounter in Mansfield. She could just picture herself trying to explain her presence and her problem:

"I'm your great, great, great, great, great-granddaughter back for a visit from the year 1850. May I come in?"

Such an approach would land her in the local lunatic asylum, with Meggo alongside for loyally backing her up!

No, she'd have to be very careful, careful whom she befriended, careful what she said, on her guard day and night. Finding her forebears would be interesting, even a trifle scary, but of little substantive value, unless one of them—if any were to be found—could come up with a clue. Once she knew for certain how she had gotten back to 1665, perhaps she could turn the thing inside out and project herself, mind and body, back to Providence and Ross.

Mind and *body*? No. Her mind was all she'd "brought

with her"; her body was Janet Stiles's, every inch, every ounce of it, outside and in. Her hair, her face, her skin, her everything. So where was Lisa Dandridge's body? Still in the bed in the master bedroom at Blackwood. Mindless, and therefore without consciousness, without functioning senses, dead. God in heaven, no! It couldn't be! There'd be no returning if it were. Which meant she was in Janet Stiles' body to stay. Returning the mind was one thing; it had come to 1665, it could conceivably be brought back, but to bring back this body as well? It was all so complicated!

Her heart sank. The day was brightening now, the raindrops resting on leaves and blades of grass locking in the sunlight, the air filled with the sweet smell of clover, the birds chirping and cattle in a pasture on their left lowing contentedly as if responding to the tired groaning of the coach wheels.

"What's the matter, dear?" whispered Meggo solicitously, covering Lisa's hands folded on her lap with one of her own. Two of their fellow passengers were asleep, the Frenchman was reading a newspaper and the fourth man was gazing out the window, palpably deep in thought.

"Nothing, Meggo. Everything."

"But we're coming to Mansfield. Everything's going to be all right. You said so yourself."

"Everything's going to be just beautiful." She smiled bitterly. "You know how they always say that your body's a jail, that you don't own it, you're just a tenant. You're in it and you can't get out until you die. But I did, didn't I? I changed jails. I'm probably the only human being in history who's managed such a thing, but I did it, for all the good it's doing me."

"You miss him, don't you?"

"Dreadfully. When I think about it, it's like a force pulling me apart inside. Being with him, being married, I loved him so deeply it was all I could do to keep from shouting it out to the world. I was so proud of it, so

brimming over with joy! But I never dreamed how deep and enduring it could be until this."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Absence makes it shatter. If I only knew where to begin. If only there was some clue, a pinhole of light. But there's nothing, that's what frightens me so. It's like fighting a ghost. You can't fight what you can't see, can you?"

Meggo's face filled with sympathy. "I'm afraid there's things go on in this life which we just aren't meant to be wise enough to understand."

"That's very reassuring."

"It's the truth, though. We don't understand miracles, but they happen all the time. Then there's some things happen to us we don't know they're going to, even though God gives us clues."

"What are you talking about?"

"When the coach left Wakefield, didn't you see that cross-eyed beggar sitting on the ground in front of the office? He was bad luck. All cross-eyed people are bad luck."

"Meggo."

"I remember because the moment I saw him I said a quick prayer to St. Christopher. I knew in my bones we were in for trouble and sure enough, those three stopped us. And would have raped and murdered you and me but for him." She inclined her head toward the Frenchman diagonally across from Lisa, deep in his newspaper.

"What, pray tell, has all this to do with my problem?"

"Some things just can't be fathomed. Others we don't recognize God's clues, though I did that one for those highwaymen."

"I don't recall your saying anything at the time. It's very easy to connect a thing with something that happened earlier, *after* the fact. But you didn't say anything because you couldn't be absolutely sure we'd meet up with them. If last night in Wakefield I'd dreamt about our meeting them, I would have told you this morning.

If I believed in dreams, that is. But everytime something like that happens and people tell you they knew it was going to, they claim they dreamt it before." She paused. "I'm sorry, I'm treading on sacred ground, aren't I? Besides, this trap I'm in really has nothing to do with that sort of thing."

"It does, it's one of God's mysteries, his plan for you."

"I doubt that. I don't know what it is, I haven't a clue, not yet. But I can't explain it away that easily. There's a reasonable understandable something at the bottom of this. It didn't just happen; something or somebody caused it. And there's a reason why they caused it. A lock doesn't spring open, Meggo, somebody has to turn the key. Somebody turned my key. I have to find out who and how and turn it back. Understand?"

"You should pray for a sign. Pray to the Blessed Mother."

"I shall. There isn't anything I'm not going to try."

## VIII

A downy woodpecker, its red-patched head bobbing assertively, deserted a crowd of chickadees perched atop a tree directly across from the window, and down it swooped, a black and white ball, alighting on the sill. The late afternoon sun feeling its way through the trees to and through the glass bathed the small trespasser in its soft golden glow as it marched about on inspection. Having chanced upon privacy to its liking, the bird would have remained had not Mody sighted it. Tensing, he crouched and sprang. But his prey was gone by the time he reached the sill and the watching chickadees above chirped derisively at him.

Lavinia laughed, gathered him up in her arms and closing the window, returned to her chair beside Lisa's bed. The door opened. Ross.

"Hello."

"You're home early," she said, rising again and giving the cat to the floor.

Crossing to the bed, he bent over Lisa and kissed her on the forehead. "How is she?"

"The same."

"When I checked down the same list of figures a third time without recognizing them, until I was all but done, I decided I wasn't doing much good and I might as well call it a day," he said, smiling thinly.

She made the face of disapproval and shook her head. "You're pushing too hard, Ross."

He pretended he hadn't heard, his eyes staring down at Lisa's prostrate form. "The way she just lies there. It's so eerie. God in heaven!"

"Dr. Craven dropped by about an hour ago."

"What for?" Ross asked almost disdainfully. "Why does he bother?"

"He said to tell you that he'll be bringing a specialist around to examine her."

"He's already brought three; what are we going to have, a parade marching in and out the door? What does he think she is, some sort of exhibit?"

"Ross, he's doing the best he can."

He laughed hollowly. "Marvelous! Lavinia, he hasn't done a damned thing, nothing! I swear to God, I don't know why we let the bastard in the front door!"

"Calm down. And be reasonable. He can't treat it if he doesn't know what it is. When he does hit on it, he'll cure it."

"I love your choice of words. He should bring a hat along. Maybe he can pull a cure out of it." He sighed and stifled a yawn with his fist.

"You're beginning to worry me as much as Lisa. You can't keep driving yourself. You haven't even taken time to lie down these past three days, let alone sleep."

"Sitting by her bed relaxes me."

"Oh, yes."

"I can't sleep, Lavinia, I've tried. I just lie there thinking, hoping, praying. The yard's good for me, the work takes my mind off things."

"It's going to put you flat on your back if you don't slow down!" She took his hand in hers and her tone softened. "Why don't you ask Dr. Craven for something to help you sleep?"

"I'm all right. What about this doctor he's bringing up?"

"He's a neuro-something-or-other, supposedly a brilliant man."

"Has he got a name?"

"I don't remember. He's English, in this country lecturing. He's coming up from Philadelphia. You've got to give Dr. Craven credit. He's trying everything."

"I know, I know, I shouldn't down him. It's just that—for Christ's sake look at her, lying there helpless, hanging on by a thread and none of us can do a damned thing! If this keeps up much longer, if Craven or this friend of his or somebody doesn't do something, I'm going to start breaking heads!"

"You do that, if it'll make you feel better. But it's not going to help her any. I know it's hard, but we've got to be patient. The important thing is she's no worse than she was four nights ago."

"She's no better."

"We haven't lost her, Ross, and we won't. I know we won't."

He squeezed her hand and managed a smile. "Lavinia, you're as beautiful inside as outside. You sit here hour after hour, the patience of Job."

"It's the least I can do. All I'm actually doing is spelling Hedridge."

"She's got her hands full with Grandfather. You're a jewel, Aunt Vinnie, and I appreciate it more than I can put into words."

She patted his cheek fondly. "You take care of you, Hedridge and I will take care of her. You don't want to be down with nervous exhaustion or whatever when she's all better and up and about. Poor darling, she'd never forgive me."

"She's very very fond of you, you know."

"We're fond of each other."

"Bringing her into this house could have been pretty uncomfortable for her, but you saved the day."

"Nonsense, that's what Aunt Vinnies are for."

"I'm very grateful, for everything."

"If you are, you'll do as I ask, start taking care of yourself. Get back to eating right, working decent hours and getting your beauty sleep."

He laughed. "Maybe you should sit beside the bed and read to me, like you used to."

"Mother Goose or the Grimms?"



"You're always here when the Dandridges need you, aren't you?"

"Like an old pair of shoes you can't get rid of."

"Our guardian angel."

"You're sweet." She kissed him on the forehead. "Now I'll let you have a little privacy. Just remember our bargain. I'll see to her, you see to you."

Craven looked in again early that evening, taking coffee with Cyrus, Ross and Lavinia in the library.

"Augustus Waller is a recognized authority on nerve degeneration," he began.

"You think that's what's ailing her?" asked Cyrus.

"She's in coma, Cyrus. It could be the liver, it could be cerebral tumor, it could be half a dozen things. But I think it's in the brain. Hopefully, Dr. Waller will confirm, but determining what it isn't can be almost as valuable as what it is."

Cyrus snorted. "I don't buy that, Alex, it could be any one of a thousand things."

Craven smiled tolerantly. "How did we get from half a dozen to a thousand so fast?"

"Tell us about this Waller," said Ross.

"He's English-born, but he's been in Germany in research for the past nine years. Earlier this year he published a paper on nerve fiber degeneration, what they're now calling Wallerian degeneration. James Bunning, the chief of staff at Roger Williams, was a classmate of his in London, and he offered to get in touch with him. This was three days ago. I held off telling you about it until we were certain he could come up. We got word this noon."

"Very good," said Ross.

"Now, don't go getting your hopes up, please. Something may come of it, but there's obviously no guarantee."

"Do you think he'll advise an operation?" inquired Lavinia.

"I don't know. This is a particularly hard row to hoe. We can't see inside the body. Even if we could, we wouldn't much know what to look for, unless a tumor or inflammation showed up. As far as surgery, I don't know how helpful it would be, possibly none at all."

"Cutting into that pretty little thing would be a terrible business," commented Cyrus.

"There's always the possibility that whatever is ailing her will turn around and heal itself."

Ross frowned. "That has to be a fairly desperate hope."

"Instead of this groping about, let's just wait and see what Waller says. Now, there's one other thing. I've discussed it with Seward, Hale and Bunning and we agree; barring any objection from Waller, she should go into the hospital."

Lavinia stiffened. "Wouldn't moving her be dangerous?"

"We may have no choice. Waller may even insist on it. In the hospital we can keep an eye on her around the clock."

"Hedridge and I have been taking turns sitting by the bed."

"That's all very well, but do you know what to look for? I'm not even sure Nellie does. For instance, what would you do if she began to stir, or she suddenly started fighting for breath? Then too, in the hospital we can take her temperature and pulse every hour and, we hope, anticipate changes, if there are any."

"But moving her all the way down there—" began Ross in a worried tone.

Cyrus nodded vigorously. "Christ Almighty, Alex, she's barely hanging on as it is!"

"Well, let's put off discussing it until we hear what he has to say. He may say no."

They sipped their coffee in silence, the tension visible on all their faces. Then the doctor put his cup down, and, rising from his chair, approached Ross.

"You look tired. You having trouble sleeping?"

"A little."

"Looks like a lot."

"I wish you'd give him something, Doctor," said Lavinia bluntly.

"I don't need anything," said Ross. "I don't want to start filling up on powders and pills."

"Suit yourself."

The Oriental alabaster clock on the mantel chimed the hour and Craven checked his watch against it. "I'd better be going," he said, "Dr. Waller will be here tomorrow, middle of the afternoon."

Lavinia and Ross saw Craven to the door, then she went to the dining room, then upstairs. She undressed for bed humming happily, propped up her pillow and read for half an hour then, donning her robe, picked up the glass of sherry she had brought up from the dining room and made her way down the hall to Ross's room next door to the master bedroom. She tapped slightly.

"Yes?"

"Me."

"One second."

The door clicked and she opened it. He was stripped to the waist, his chest bronzed, the flesh gleaming in the steady glow of the lamp light. At once she felt the urge to reach out and draw her fingers down his chest, steal the warmth of his splendid body, catch it and let it race through her own to stir the fires of her lust. She handed him the glass.

"This'll help you sleep."

"Very thoughtful of you. Come in."

"I shan't stay." She searched his eyes, suffusing her own with compassion. "Try and relax, Ross. Put it out of your mind, at least until morning. There's nothing any of us can do lying awake thinking about it."

"I know." He sipped the wine, then offered her the glass. "It's excellent."

"You drink it all."

He did so, and moving to the bed set the glass on the nightstand. She glanced about.

"I haven't been in this room for years."

He gestured at the Regency chair occupying the corner opposite the head of the bed. "Recognize that?"

"My old reading chair."

"The nights you sent me off with my head filled with knights and dragons, Indians and pirates. My own personal thousand and one nights!"

"I enjoyed those stories as much as you." She sighed. "It seems ages ago. So much has happened to us since then, good and bad."

"This is the worst yet," he reflected sadly. "She's so young. We hadn't even started being married, not really."

She took his hands comfortingly. "She's going to be all right, I know she will."

"I wish I could be that optimistic."

"Get into bed, I'll tuck you in."

"No, you don't. I feel helpless enough already." Taking her in his arms, he kissed her on the forehead. Her heart raced as she felt his warmth, her throat becoming dry. She wanted to seize him by the neck and bring his lips down on hers, but it would be foolhardy. Whether she liked it or not, she would have to be patient, bide her time, let the scroll of events unroll at its own leisurely pace.

They said their good nights and she went back to her room. Locking the door, she was preparing to open the bottom drawer and take out the silken shrouded mirror when an insistent scratching sounded at the window. Dozing on the rug at the foot of the bed, Mody looked up alertly. On the sill outside stood Erica's cat. Dressing hurriedly, Lavinia unlocked her door and moving stealthily down the hallway, descended the stairs to the front door and went outside.

Erica was standing under a tree at the edge of the

circle, her skin pale and waxen in the white light of the moon.

"What do you want?" asked Lavinia.

"The Master sent me. He wants to see you; He's at the church."

Lavinia tensed, a wave of fear sweeping over her. "You come with me."

Erica shook her head. "No, it's you He wants to see."

"About what?"

"He didn't tell me. Better hurry."

## IX

The church was deep in the woods, roughly a quarter mile to the east of the sabbat circle. Access to it from the main road was restricted to a single narrow pathway which, during the past two years, had become all but completely overgrown. The church itself was a small wooden structure built and used by local Methodists until a fire of unknown origin had virtually destroyed it, leaving the outer shell but consuming the interior from the entrance to the apse.

Lavinia half ran through the woods, pushing branches aside and ignoring the rough going underfoot, concerned only with what lay ahead. Something was wrong. It had to be, why else would he want a meeting? The fragility of the whole arrangement involving Lisa, its complexity and total dependency upon Settle, suddenly came home to her.

Settle! This would be her chance to tell Ledion all about his greediness, the way he'd attempted to bleed her, and succeeded.

She was almost faint with exhaustion by the time she finally came within sight of the church. It stood with its spire framed against the star-strewn sky, its hollow windows—black in white—staring blindly, the breeze moaning through them, swirling about the empty belfry and clattering a loose shutter against the unseen far side of the building.

Hesitating at the door, she caught her breath, made a half-hearted effort to relax, then went in. The rubble had been swept from the nave to the side aisles creating a wide pathway clear to the altar. She peered through the gloom, but there was no sign of Ledion, nothing but

the half-burned pulpit lying on its side to the left of the chancel and the empty window frame behind it gaping forlornly.

Reaching the altar she cast about, her eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the darkness. A rectangular space had been cleared in the center in front of the apse, and droplets of what appeared to be water were spattered over it, as if someone had been standing there, someone whose outer clothing had dripped on it.

"Lavinia!"

She started. His voice was like a knife cutting through the night and finding her heart. Emerging from the shadows, the outline of His tall figure becoming definable, He moved to the center of the altar and turning, looked down upon her. His head and chest, visible where His cloak parted, were covered with gray-white rimelike moisture, and His piercing gaze fixed and held her as the corners of His mouth turned down in displeasure.

"Lavinia, Lavinia."

"Yes, Master?"

He came closer to her, folding His arms and continuing to stare down at her, as if looking into her mind and examining her thoughts as they took shape.

"Fortune treats you shabbily. You require help to set things right. You request it. I agree to help, willingly, gladly. I enlist the aid of a loyal subject and together we plan very carefully and come up with the perfect solution, the only solution to your problem. But do you show the vaguest semblance of appreciation?"

"May I explain what happened?" she asked quietly.

"What explanation can there be? He offers you his services and in return suggests what seems to me to be fair compensation."

"He was greedy and demanding! He asked me for five hundred dollars and I agreed. Then he insisted on more, on practically everything I own! He even forced me

to—" She paused. "Never mind. He's disgusting, and a liar and a thief to boot!"

"He told me—"

"He's a liar!"

"Somebody's lying. But is that really the point? Think about it, the man is making it possible for you to get back everything you've lost, a hundred, a thousand times the value of that ring."

"I don't deny that, and I'm grateful. I told him so."

"Perhaps the ring has more value to you than the Dandridge name. Do you want it back? If so, you can have it; we can terminate this whole business."

"No! My lord Ledion, I don't want the ring or the money, none of it." She dropped to her knees. "Please understand, it was a trying time. I was on edge, worried that something would go wrong. Out of the blue he insisted—"

He cut her off with a wave. "He had every right! *You* must understand he's not a wealthy man. His practice is meager, less profitable even than it was in Providence. He went out of his way to help you as a favor to me."

"I'm sorry."

The sternness went out of His voice, a patronizing tone replacing it. The understanding parent began advising the errant child to examine her attitude and reshape it accordingly.

"Unless, as I say, you prefer to call it off and deal with it in your own way."

"No, no."

"I take it it's going well."

"Yes, except they're talking about moving her to the hospital."

"Let them. There's nothing physically wrong with her. They can't do anything for her, but they can't do anything to her, either, unless of course they decide to cut her open and look around inside for what's ailing her."



"Ross would never let them."

Ledion narrowed His eyes and smiled. "And how is that progressing?"

"I shall need time."

"Isn't that the whole point of this? The strings are all in your grasp now. Do you think you'll be able to win him over?"

"I don't see how I can possibly fail."

"I wouldn't be too aggressive."

"I'm not being aggressive at all, the furthest thing from it. Now that the shock is wearing off he's filling up with sympathy for her. Given time his loyalty will surface, a tidal wave of it, faithful Abelard patiently waiting. Only as time goes on and his hopes dim and the doctors begin losing interest and he becomes restless—"

"Nature taking its course, and all the while you continue playing the ministering angel."

She laughed. "You should see me, it's nauseating."

"Just be careful you keep a firm rein on your emotions."

"I intend to."

"And your greed."

She hung her head, inwardly hating Settle, at the same time envying him his power, but angry and embarrassed by what he had done to her, holding out for the ring, then tattling to Ledion like a schoolboy carrying a tale to his teacher.

"I consulted my mirror. I was curious to know when it would all be over."

His face darkened. "You must be patient. It's just beginning."

"It clouded over, I couldn't see a thing."

"I suggest you stay away from it."

That wasn't a suggestion; it was a command.

"I don't understand."

"The outcome of all this is yet to be determined," He said in a cryptic tone.

"But you said—you promised—"

"Do you know, I'm beginning to see you in an entirely different light."

"You don't know what this means to me. You can't conceive!"

"I can't conceive? Lavinia, knowing now what lies ahead would be of no value to you. None whatsoever. Try and control your curiosity. If you looked and didn't see exactly what you expected, you'd make a mess of everything."

"That's not so!"

"Stay away from your mirror!"

She didn't understand his reasoning. It made no sense; they were all in it together, anything he knew she should know.

It made no sense, but it did trigger a concern. Was it possible that Ledion didn't know what the outcome was to be, that despite having worked it all out with Settle and with the host at the other end, there was no way He could be absolutely certain as to the result? Perhaps, she mused, it all depended upon Lisa's condition, that in her present delicate state, the thread of life could accidentally part. Lavinia wanted desperately to press the issue, but hesitated to. Better she keep her concerns to herself than risk bruising His vanity by questioning His judgment.

Once more He cautioned her to let things fall into place in their time, without attempting to influence them. He then ordered her to lie down in the open space in the center of the altar.

On her way back to the house she thought about their conversation. He had been unnecessarily harsh with her, and unfair. It was Settle who had raised the problem, not she. Ledion had no cause to upbraid her, making it seem as if she were wholly in the wrong, as if Settle's whims and wishes came before everything. It was clearly a case of male siding with male. And for-

bidding her to consult her glass was pointless and stupid. She would do it regardless. He'd never know. No need to invoke His aid, she could call upon the seven fairies of Hathor, or the great god Min.

By the time she got to the house she was livid with anger, in part directed at herself for being afraid to defend her conduct in dealing with Settle. Making her way to her room, she locked the door and went at once to the bottom drawer. She had every right to be upset! There were limits to even Ledion's authority; after all she was His subject, not His slave!

Taking the box out, she opened it, unfolding the silk. Mody came purring to her, rubbing against her shin. Suddenly she stiffened, gasping loudly.

The mirror had shattered into a hundred slender shards.

Cursing, she hurled the box back into the drawer and slammed it shut. As if that would stop her! Pulling the drawer open a second time, she fumbled about in search of her tarot cards taken from the cabriole table in the master bedroom on the night following the funeral. She didn't need the mirror, the cards would tell her everything she wanted to know, as far into the future as she cared to look!

She preferred them to the mirror, anyway. Properly placed and interpreted, they could tell one practically anything, without the need for outside assistance, Ledion's or anyone else's. Their symbols were constant, dependably truthful, a "miraculous doctrine in pictorial form concerning the nature of the essences of life," as Erica put it.

Seating herself at the bed, she shuffled the pack, placed it in front of her and with great ceremony began dealing out the cards.

To her astonishment, the first one was completely blank! Hands trembling, she sifted through the rest. They were all blank, pristine white rectangles of pasteboard without the faintest suggestion of sign or symbol.

## X

They got out of the coach in front of the village smith's, whose hammer was clanging monotonously, with the few passers-by taking as little notice of the noise as they might of a song sparrow. Descending the coach step, and feeling the bright sun, Lisa looked about. Sight of the village, even at a distance, had filled her with a strange feeling, the sensation of seeing it through someone else's eyes, perhaps a dead ancestor's, she had thought. The Mansfield of all her years, the town she had loved, that had given so much happiness to her growing-up time, had been immense compared with this, laced with winding streets and lanes, with inns and shops and other business places clustered about its center, and hundreds of neat, white cottages circling it.

Up the street, in place of the well-remembered rows upon rows of houses, lay great sprawling cornfields stretching to the green fringes of Sherwood Forest. Her Mansfield boasted more than thirty thousand people; this lazy little rural coach stop, no more than two thousand, if that many.

Shabby little homes and shops challenged each other across the main street. Instead of the familiar cross streets and picturesque lanes, narrow alleyways twisted between the buildings, reaching into yards and small gardens.

"It's not Mansfield," she said morosely, "it's nothing like it."

"It is pretty, though," ventured Meggo, "much nicer than Blyth with all those filthy boats and the gulls and the storms rolling in from the sea. And salt like skin all over everything." She reached for her bag at her

feet, but in picking it up, she winced and cried out sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"It's my pain."

"What pain?"

"My heart." She placed her fingertips against her right rib cage under her breast.

"That's not your heart, it's down too far and the wrong side." Meggo sucked in her breath. "I'll carry both bags. Can you walk?"

"Yes, it's going away."

Lisa pointed at the White Boar Inn diagonally across the street. "We can get a room and something to eat there. I'm starving."

Their room turned out to be cramped and stuffy, too close to the ceiling, and drawing the heat of the broiling sun through the thatched roof. They unpacked, hanging Meggo's things in the frippery. Lisa regretted leaving Blyth in such haste, neglecting to take time to pack anything of Janet Stiles's. Still, she could not censure herself for failing to remember that Janet's possessions were now her own. Getting used to the thing wasn't that easy. Meggo sat down on the bed.

"Still hurt?" Lisa asked.

"Just a little. It's going away. Honestly, it always does."

"How long have you had it?"

"Two years off and on. It usually comes after I drink something cold, especially on a hot day like this. But this time it just came."

"Do you take anything for it?"

"The doctor gave me some black medicine in a stone bottle."

"What sort of medicine?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, he didn't say what was in it. It tasted foul, and it didn't help a pin, even though I drank it all just as he said to."

"Did he say what caused the pain?"

"Su-per-flew-ers humors. One time he bled me, but that didn't do any good either."

"How often does it come?"

"It used to be weeks apart, but lately it's oftener."

"Which means, whatever it is, it's getting worse."

"The pain shoots through like a knife, but if I rest it goes away. I live with it. There's worse things."

"It's not right, Meggo. That doctor's a quack, he must be."

"Aren't they all?"

Lisa considered this. In 1665, the vast majority had to be, unable as they were to diagnose properly, guessing, experimenting, killing their helpless patients far more often than nature could cure them.

"I'll go get us something to eat," she said. "You lie down and rest."

"I'm all right now."

"Lie down. I'll be right back."

The owner of the White Boar was a Mr. Timothy Radwell, an affable, overweight, middle-aged country gentleman with one usable eye and the other concealed behind a pirate patch. He got a cold breast of fowl and some oranges and two mugs of fresh milk from the kitchen and inquired as to how long they planned to be his guests.

"I can't say for certain," said Lisa, "but you needn't worry, we have money."

"I'm not worried about that," said Radwell expansively, beaming. "'Pon my soul, I'll not be welcoming you to Mansfield with hand out and fingers itching. Nor will I inquire where you're from or why you're stopping here. Timothy Radwell minds his own affairs, he does."

She liked Timothy Radwell; the look in his eye was honest and his smile genuine. He was the warmest and friendliest soul she and Meggo had met since departing Blyth.

"May I discuss something of a personal nature with you, Mr. Radwell?"

They were seated at a small table in the kitchen, the ceiling hung with plucked geese and chickens, a pot of stew simmering on the stove, its pleasant aroma seeking out the corners of the room. Radwell leaned forward, eyes gleaming conspiratorially.

"What?"

"My friend isn't well."

He straightened. "It's not the plague!"

"No, no."

"It's started up in London. It could work its way up here."

"It's not the plague or the pox, nothing catching." She described Meggo's condition. "What I wanted to know was, is there a decent doctor around these parts?"

Radwell slapped the table, sending one of the oranges rolling toward the center, where he caught it. "The very best in Nottingham! Dr. Isaak Golightly. We shall have him take a look at her, by all means!"

"I really think he ought to."

"I'll send a boy round to fetch him straightaway. You take this food on up to your room. He'll be by in a wink."

Meggo and she ate in silence, until halfway through the fowl Lisa announced that the doctor was on his way up.

"Oh dear, I wish you hadn't."

"Meggo, there's no harm in his looking at you. Mr. Radwell claims he's very good. You never know, he may come up with a cure."

"We're going to have to pay him. We're spending our money at a great rate."

Lisa made no comment on this, but she knew Meggo was right. Starting out with something less than twelve pounds, their coach fares alone over their five days' journey had amounted to a hundred shillings. Food and lodging in Teesside, Hull, Wakefield and Bawtry had taken another thirty, depleting their resources to five pounds plus a few coppers.

"That won't even last us till the end of the month," said Meggo gloomily.

"We'll find work."

"If we can, if there is any. You ought to be looking for your relatives."

"Ancestors, you mean. That can wait. The first thing we have to do is get whatever it is wrong with you tended to."

"What'll you do if you find somebody from your family?"

"I don't know. I certainly can't explain this business to them. Actually, it's just coming back to Mansfield I guess I really wanted. If I can't get back to Providence, this is the next best thing."

"You're still going to try to get back to Providence, aren't you?"

"I've thought and thought about it, dear, and I can't conceive how."

"There's such a thing as miracles, you know. They happen."

"They may happen, but they're usually not available on demand."

"At least we're away from Blyth."

"That we are, and you're right, we should look on the bright side of things. We're away from Brother Simon and his friends, we've gotten down here in one piece, we've got ourselves a fresh start."

"A fresh helping of luck."

"Helping?"

"That's what my father used to say. I remember I was very little and he used to take me to his work. I'd sit on a bench and watch him and the other coopers binding the timber staves of the barrels with the hoops. Those hoops were made of hazelwood, you know. They smelled so fresh and clean when they shaved them down to size."

"What sort of barrels did they make?"

"All sorts, all sizes and washtubs and scuttles and



buckets. But once this place where he worked burned down, there was no more work. He looked all over London and nobody needed a man. And there was no money left, almost nothing to eat, no wood for the stove. But he never gave up looking and every night when he came home he'd pick me up and smile his big smile and say 'Meg, little princess mine, what we need is a fresh helping of luck.' Then he'd get one of the bowls down out of the cupboard and set it on the windowsill and open the window and we'd go to bed. Next morning, the second he got up, he'd look in the bowl and smile and say: 'will you look here, we've caught ourselves a little. Not much, but some. See it?' "

"And did you?"

"Oh yes, and that's the funny part. Once we found it full and he went out and found a job quick as a bug. And kept at it for years, until the accident. There was a fight in the lane near Greenstairs, almost right outside our door. He was just passing by and one of them stuck a knife in his back. And then I went to work for that old lady. I think I was about fourteen or so."

A knock sounded at the door. "Hello. Dr. Golightly."

He was younger than Lisa's imagination had pictured him, a good-looking, well-built man in a close cloth coat with a white taffeta under the cut. His coat hung to the calf of his leg, lending him a dignity that piled years on his age. His breeches were Spanish cut, his stockings white wool and his boots black and shining like glass. Lisa introduced them and he began at once to question Meggo. Her answers etched his features in a look of concern.

"Stone," he said to himself aloud.

Lisa touched his sleeve. "I beg your pardon?"

"A gallstone, possibly more than one. She should have it tended to. The condition can only worsen; the pain can become very severe, excruciating."

"You mean cut into me with a knife?" Her eyes swelled with dread. "No, you can't!"

"It's up to you."

"Is it the only way?" asked Lisa. "Isn't there something she might take to dissolve it?"

He shook his head. "You don't have to have it removed, but I would advise it. If you were one of my family I wouldn't hesitate. If I myself had one, I'd run to the nearest surgeon. If you don't have it out, sooner or later you'll wish you had. You're a young woman; why endure unnecessary agony for the rest of your life? Which you surely will."

"We'll talk it over," said Lisa.

"As you wish. If you want me you can reach me in Parson's Mews, next door the market. You'll see my sign."

Lisa nodded. "Thank you."

He left and she confronted Meggo. "It's for you to decide, dear."

"What do you think?"

"If I had it, I'd have it done."

"I could die!"

"I don't think there's much danger of that. Of course, I'm no doctor. Ask him, ask him everything. He seems to know his business. At least he didn't fill us full of tonics."

"It'll hurt, won't it?"

"Of course, but maybe no worse than it hurt you down in the street. As far as that goes, he can give you morphine."

"You think I'm being a baby, don't you?"

"Of course I don't! It's not the most pleasant prospect. Anybody would think twice."

"Sometimes the pain is fierce, especially if it comes when I'm in bed at night. I could scream down the rafters!" She sighed heavily. "I break out in a great sweat at the first hint of it, knowing what it'll be when it comes hard. Down in the street was nothing like what it can be." She set her jaw determinedly. "I do like him. I trust him."

"I would."

"I'll do it I will!"

"Good girl."

The operation was to be performed the following afternoon in the surgery in Dr. Golightly's quarters in Parson's Mews. The patient undressed and was given a sheet to cover her and instructed to lie down on a bare wooden table. Having asked to be present, Lisa stood alongside the table gripping Meggo's hand firmly as Dr. Golightly got his scapel out and began honing it on an oilstone. He next prepared his needle and surgical thread and lastly took a probe out of his instrument box, wiping it on his shirtsleeve and setting it on the table alongside the other things.

"There's ointment in that cabinet," he said indicating. "Would you please get it for me? We'll need it afterward."

Lisa got out a jar of ointment, handing it to him. "Anything else?"

"We'll have to give her something to help ease the—discomfort. I usually use a concoction of rosewater, egg white, a bit of licorice."

Lisa cut in. "Don't you have any ether?"

"Ether?"

"Then what about morphine?" Golightly stared mystified. "It's made from opium, I think," Lisa went on.

"Opium? I don't use it. I don't know any doctor who does."

"You'll need something to really dull the pain."

"The rosewater. I use it all the time." He moved to his instrument box on the table in the corner and opening it, held up a wooden stick about four inches long. "She can bite down on this, too."

Lisa could scarcely suppress a groan. What had she gotten poor Meggo into? Was this a doctor's office or a slaughterhouse? Still, what was surgery in this century, this closing-out of the Dark Ages? what but out-and-out butchery, indescribable agony and suffering and

prayer—beseeching Almighty God to let you live, instead of bleeding to death or dying of infection, if whatever ailed you didn't kill you first?

"Aren't you even going to sterilize your instruments?"

"I don't usually. I—"

"You will wash your hands!"

"If you wish, though for the life of me I don't see why it's necessary."

She wanted to say "For the life of her, do it!" but quelled the impulse. Golightly rolled his sleeves up another turn and started for the pump outside.

"You'll need soap, Doctor."

"May I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Are you a doctor? What am I saying? You couldn't be. You're a woman."

"The strongest soap you have, if you don't mind."

He was becoming increasingly confused, but she seemed so very sure of herself and her tone was so commanding, he reacted without hesitating, getting soap from the kitchen and going outside to wash. Having followed him into the kitchen, Lisa found a pot and filled it at the pump. Returning, she set it on the stove and lit the fire. He appeared in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, eying her with an amused look.

"What's that for? She's not having a baby."

"We have to boil your instruments to sterilize them. Get them, please."

He shrugged and did so. She found two clean linen napkins in a chest in the sitting room. She then plunged the scalpel, probe and needle and thread into the boiling water, waited a time, dumped out the water and wrapping the things in one of the napkins, carried them back to the surgery.

Clutching her rosary, Meggo raised herself on one elbow. "Is it going to be all right?" she asked.

"Yes," said the doctor. "Just lie back and relax." He mixed his rosewater concoction in a cup and handing it

to her, ordered her to down it. When she'd done so, he gave her the stick, gesturing for her to place it between her jaws. "Bite down on it hard as you can."

"Mmmmmm."

Lisa took firm hold of both her arms. "There'll be a little pain, dear, but it won't be for long." The doctor picked his scalpel up from the napkin and approached her.

"Steady does it."

Her eyes fixed on the gleaming blade brimmed with terror. He cut. Her scream split the air, a harrowing, soul-searing cry of mortal anguish that froze Lisa where she stood. The stick clattered to the floor and Meggo's shoulders wrenched, her whole body convulsing.

"Get hold of her!" shouted Golightly. "Get around the end and grab her shoulders. Hold her down! Damn it, girl, stop your kicking!"

Snatching up his probe, he thrust it into the incision, working it about, locating the stone, bringing it out. Then he went back in a second time.

"That's it. Just the one."

"Stanch the blood!" shouted Lisa. "Sew her up, hurry!"

He did so, with surprising dexterity. By now Meggo had passed out, her face turning white, lips draining of color. She looked dead.

"I'll get more napkins and clean up," said Lisa quietly, feeling nauseated and suddenly completely exhausted.

"My compliments," said the doctor. "You are a very efficient assistant."

Applying the ointment to the incision, he then wiped his scalpel, the probe and the needle with the napkin Lisa had wrapped them in in bringing them from the kitchen. This done, he returned all three to his instrument box.

"Would you like a job?" he asked.

"I'm afraid this isn't my dish of tea."

"Are you all right? Sit down and get your breath."

She reeled to a chair, took a number of deep breaths, felt better and turned her eyes on the sleeping Meggo.

"I expect we just let her sleep now."

"Yes."

"I wonder if the poor thing will ever forgive me."

"For what?"

She hesitated to explain. He appeared genuinely proud of his efforts, and his success. Why prick the poor man's professional pride? After all, wasn't he "the very best in Nottingham"?

## XI

Dr. Golightly insisted that Meggo remain with him for the next two days, putting her to bed in a room in the rear of his lodgings. Alone for the first time since departing Blackwood, Lisa began to yield to feelings of depression. No matter how often she examined her situation, it always ended up as a steel box, without doors or windows, with her trapped inside. To make matters worse, her yearning for Ross was increasing daily. She longed so for his touch, and for the sound of his voice she could hardly bear it, and being alone in the room only intensified her craving.

Unable to sleep, she would sit at the foot of the bed, gazing out the window at the moon, aware that, regardless of the wrenching of time and its effect, it was the same moon he would be seeing, the same stars. She would talk to him for hours, until her eyes filled with tears and, overcome by the futility of her situation, she would turn her thoughts to the realities of the present.

Meggo's operation had been a frightening experience for the two of them, made even more so by the fact that her treatment was undoubtedly the best available, this far from London at any rate. In 1850, Dr. Izaak Golightly's ignorance of the need for sterilization and for anesthesia would be unthinkable. In his first week in medical school he'd have been taught everything known and practiced on both subjects. In 1665, life was dangerous in other respects, as well for anyone genuinely interested in surviving, in every way possible that two hundred years of progress could not help but improve upon. Now, there was little or no law and order, in rural areas like Mansfield in particular, certainly no established police system, apart from part-time farmer-

constables. Chosen by the parish magistrates and only expected to chase criminals after their own day's work in the fields was done, the constables were eluded with ridiculous ease, thieves and murderers alike simply moving on to the next village, out of their jurisdiction. It was shocking. In a properly-ordered society anyone daring to hold up a coach would have been caught, tried and hanged within the month.

The goings-on at the Cock and Fiddle would never be tolerated. The lack of basic creature comforts—the sanitary conditions, the filth and foulness all about, indoors and out, the subjugation and exploitation of women and children, the appalling ignorance, the wide breach between classes, the insensitivity of those in authority to human needs and desires all combined to make life barely tolerable for few and miserable for the overwhelming majority.

An additional worry invaded her thinking, or rather, an old worry returned: Simon Stiles. Meggo insisted that the blow on the head with the coal tongs would never have killed him, and the more Lisa thought about it, the more she was inclined to agree. In which case, he would certainly be after them. In her first encounter with him he had impressed Lisa as the vengeful sort, and whether she had stolen twelve pounds or twelve pence would make little difference to him. To catch and punish the thief would be a matter of principle.

Still, if he did come after them, he'd have no easy time of it. Between Blyth and Mansfield, they had changed coaches no less than four times, and with so many passengers taking so many coaches day after day for anyone to be able to recall either Meggo or her from his description of them would be little short of miraculous. Then too, if he did come after them, whom would he get to run the Cock and Fiddle in his absence?

On the scales there seemed a great deal of weight in the pan of optimism, although even taking all of it in one lump could not assure his remaining in Blyth and



putting the loss of his money and addition of his headache out of mind. Perhaps she should make a serious effort to find her grandparents-five-times-removed, or even a distant aunt or uncle or cousin. These were superstitious people, most of them unable to read or write, people whose hands rather than brains took them through life. If she could locate any Allworths or Pinckneys from her mother's family, she might succeed in inducing them to accept her explanation of what had happened—she hoped they'd do so as eagerly as Meggo had. If so, they would then take the two of them under their protection. And if Simon did show up, Meggo and Lisa would be prepared to deal with him.

Two days after the operation, Dr. Golightly had Meggo brought back to the room on a litter and put right to bed. Lisa was relieved to see the color coming back into her cheeks and the suggestion of a wan smile, more of relief than happiness she assumed.

"How do you feel, Meggo?"

"Weak as a kitten, but better. I'm sore down there, but there's no pain."

Dr. Golightly held up a small glass phial, in it a jagged white stone. "Here's the culprit. Yours to keep and tell your grandchildren about, Meggo." She started to laugh, but stopped abruptly, wincing. The doctor turned to Lisa. "Ma'am, you're to see that your patient stays in bed until she feels comfortable enough to get up and about. She's to have all the beef broth she can take, and apply this to the area every day." He handed her the jar of ointment.

"I'll attend to her like a queen," said Lisa. "Now, what about your fee?"

"Oh my yes, I'd forgotten all about that."

"I can't believe my ears. On second thought, knowing you, I can."

He thought a moment. "Would ten shillings be too much?"

"That's very very fair."

"Then ten it shall be."

Lisa paid him, thanked him and he left, promising to look in occasionally "until Meggo tires of seeing my face." Lisa brushed the hair back from her eyes and raising her head, plumped her pillow.

"Comfortable?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Hungry?"

"A little. I've had so much broth I think I'd rather wait a bit."

Lisa shook her head. "I'm sorry for all this, Meggo. I never dreamed it would be so hard on you."

"It wasn't half bad, honestly. At least I got it out of me."

"That you did." Lisa held up the phial and studied the stone. "It's scary-looking. I wonder if I've anything like it crawling 'round inside me?"

"You'd know it if you had."

"Do you think you can fall asleep? It would be very good for you."

"I can sleep for a week."

"Good. In the meantime I'll get you some broth. It's usually scalding. I'll set it on the sill to cool until you wake up. We'll have you on your feet in no time."

"Lisa?"

"Yes?"

"What are we going to do for money?"

"Don't worry, we've plenty."

"I know how much we have. Paying Dr. Golightly and this room for the week'll bring us down under three quid. I won't be able to work for a while, and you shouldn't, I mean you should be out looking for your family."

"I can do both."

"You'd have been better off if you'd left me in Blyth and gone it alone."

"That's silly. You're the only friend I have in the world. I'd be lost without you. Now stop looking for

things to worry about. Close your eyes and go to sleep."

"All right."

There was, Lisa thought as she sat and watched her surrender to sleep, something splendid and at the same time discouraging in Meggo's stoic acceptance of her existence. She always seemed so able to manage a smile and a generous helping of tolerance for the worst situation, and her cheerful willingness to resign herself to misfortune invariably armored her against a world as cruel and unjust as any writer of fiction could imagine. But for all of that she was such a helpless creature, and her attitude toward those who abused her infuriated Lisa.

She herself had none of Meggo's forbearance, nor would she have wanted any. Indeed, she almost wished now that she *had* killed Simon, split his skull, the bastard, the rotten-hearted mongrel! What Ross would have done to him if he'd got hold of him.

Going downstairs, she threaded her way through the main room thick with tobacco smoke, the stench of sour ale, and the din of babble and clinking tankards. She was heading for the kitchen when she caught sight of Dr. Golightly and Timothy Radwell sitting in the corner opposite the front door. Radwell spied her and gestured her to join them.

"Dr. Golightly here says your friend is doing splendidly," he said.

"Doing well is what I said," said the doctor smiling. "Won't you join us?"

Radwell nodded. "Name your pleasure, child."

"Nothing, thank you." She sat in a chair moved out from behind the table by the doctor. "I was just telling Timothy what a great help you were. I understand you're looking for employment."

"I haven't really started."

"My offer's still good, a shilling a day."

"That's very generous, but just the smell of alcohol makes me queasy and going through another operation

like that one—" She rolled her eyes and made a face.

"I wish I could use you here," said Radwell, "but there's Mrs. R. and the two girls. It's all we have need for. Then too I doubt you'd enjoy having your sitdown slapped and pinched by our patrons. There's work in the fields, of course, getting the corn and hay in, but that won't be till harvest."

"How about one of the shops?" asked the doctor. "Or maybe work as a seamstress. Do you sew?"

"Yes. Is there any lacemaking here in Mansfield?"

Radwell nodded. "Dozens of women work at it, in their own homes. Men come round every week or so to collect what they've done and pay them. And leave them more supplies."

"Is it needlepoint or bobbin?"

"I wouldn't know one from the other, but I know lace is worked."

"What does it pay?"

"Upwards of thruppence," said the doctor. "I know, because one of my maiden aunts has been at it for years."

"Thruppence an hour seems very low."

"A day."

She scowled. "That's slave wages."

"Ah," said Radwell, "but if you got into a house where three or four live, working at it full time, you'd get board and lodging as well."

"I see. Well, I'll look into it. Of course we may be moving on, once Meggo's able to travel."

"You wouldn't!" declared Radwell. "You've only just got here. Are we to lose you so fast? You've barely started making friends!"

His reaction touched her. "Well, I don't know as we'll be able to stay permanently."

"One place is as good as another, I always say," said Radwell, "and as bad. Of course Mansfield's the best."

The doctor looked at her solemnly. "If you leave, where would you go?" She shrugged. "Well, take a bit

of advice and stay clear of London. The plague's come and it's spreading all over the city."

"So I hear."

"It promises to be an epidemic. They've no idea what the cause is."

"Fleas carried by rats," said Lisa flatly.

"I don't think so," said Golightly, but with little conviction in his tone. She could tell from the look on his face that he had no idea what caused plague. Amazing, she thought. Any schoolboy in Europe or America knew it was the fleas carried by rodents, infesting travelers' clothing, being brought across the channel from Holland and Belgium to Dover and then on to London where the filth and squalor provided an ideal breeding ground.

"Bother the cause," said Radwell glumly. "It's the way it kills that worries folk. It wipes out whole families."

"Actually, most physicians agree on the cause," said Golightly airily.

"Fleas," said Lisa.

"Not to my knowledge," he said. "Medical opinion has it that it's caused by some alteration of the air we breathe, being filled as it is with effluvia from decayed organic matter, stagnant or putrid water and the like. Mass outbreaks of the disease seem to occur when the stars describe a malign conjunction, this in turn poisoning the atmosphere."

"Fleas," said Lisa.

"You're entitled to your opinion," he said tightly. "The fact remains it's in London and it's going to get much worse before it runs its course. So if you do leave, best give that whole area a wide berth. Did you know that less than forty years ago eighty-six thousand persons perished of it in Milan?"

"I hadn't heard," said Lisa. "Mr. Radwell, I'd like some more beef broth for Meggo, if you've any hot."

"Sitting on top the stove. Mrs. Radwell's in there, she'll give you all you need."

"Thank you." She rose from her chair. "And thank you again, Dr. Golightly, you saved her life."

He reacted pleased. He was entitled to a public compliment, she thought, having had the shorings kicked from under his nonsensical theories regarding the plague. Malign conjunction of the stars indeed!

Meggo awoke shortly before dark and she fed her the broth. Then she told her about her conversation with Radwell and the doctor.

"What do you know about lacemaking?" asked Meggo.

"As much as you know about making barrels. It's ironic. My father was in the business right here in Mansfield, in Whitcomb Street."

"Where's that?"

"Out in the middle of the biggest cornfield, on the south side of the road back the way we came. Think, Meggo, I'm talking about lacemaking in the eighteen-forties. These people here and now are working it by hand, so slowly it's pathetic."

She went on to describe a machine that could do "ten times the work hand workers could do in a tenth of the time." She even sketched a picture of the machine.

"And the bobbins they use now, I've seen them in a museum. They're solid."

"So?"

"Meggo, with a solid bobbin, the thread is wound about the neck. It gets dirty, and is worked into the pattern dirty. But modern bobbins are hollow. The thread's inside. It's like the warp beam on a loom. It's much easier to work with and it keeps the thread spotless. There's dozens of things I know that can speed up the work, and make a better job, keep it cleaner." She tapped her temple. "There's lots in here, and it can earn us a whole lot more than thruppence a day."

"I don't know the first thing about lacemaking."

"It's easy as pie, I shall teach you."

"I'd rather make lacy things than work in the fields, that's for sure. Heavy work might bring my pain back."

"Don't be silly, your pain's in that bottle and there it stays!"

## XII

The next morning, at Meggo's urging, but with more curiosity than hope for worthwhile results, Lisa went to the Church of St. Jude to examine the registry. With the exception of a handful of Catholics and even fewer Jews, all persons born in Mansfield and the surrounding area were Church of England, baptized by the church fathers and their names inscribed in the dusty and ponderously large leatherbound book.

In it, however, were neither Allworth nor Pinckney, and only one Cleveland, Lisa's mother's sister's husband's name. According to the rector, the Cleveland in evidence was an elderly widow, totally deaf and partially blind, living in Rackham Alley. This was all Lisa needed to know. She could hardly beg the protection of a helpless old lady against Simon Stiles.

She came away from the church reweighing the possibilities of his appearing. While Meggo and she were staying at the White Boar, they would, in effect, be under Timothy Radwell's protection. She could depend upon Radwell, but only if she told him why and under what circumstances they had left Blyth. This she hesitated to do, mostly because she had no wish to expose him to possible danger. If Simon did succeed in tracking them to Mansfield, he certainly wouldn't let Radwell or, for that matter, anyone else stand in the way of his vengeance.

Meggo was convinced they would never see Simon again.

"He's got no close friends, nobody he could trust five minutes running the inn, let alone the time it'd take him to catch us up."



"He could always lock the door and pack his money with him."

"I doubt he'd do that. Losing all that business for the time he's away wouldn't sit right with him. And I don't fancy he'd risk carrying his money on the road with so many thieves about."

Meggo made a surprisingly rapid recovery and within a few days was up and about. They discussed taking employment in lacemaking, agreed to try, and so informed Timothy Radwell.

"Angus Bains is the one you'll want to talk to," he said, standing at the serving board with a foaming tankard of stout in each hand. "I had an idea you might decide on lace, so I checked up. He's always on the lookout for help."

"Where do we find him?" asked Lisa.

"He comes once a week to the house across from Dr. Golightly's. I hear tell there's women living there who work for him full time, and it's his stopover. Today's Wednesday, his day. He should be there now. Go talk to him, drive yourselves a hard bargain, but mind, not in front of the others. Good luck."

Angus Bains's Scottish accent was as thick as a Glasgow coal heaver's. He stood behind an enormous paunch, over which his silken weskit was bound as tightly as a corset. Despite his age—well above sixty in Lisa's estimation—his homely, pockmark-riddled and generous-nosed face and ridiculously shaped body, he obvious fancied himself quite the ladies' man. He reeked of scent—his wig saturated with it—and he took his snuff with the flamboyant air of Beau Brummell himself, from an expensive-looking silver box. Lisa's first look at the man was all she needed to decide that he was as fully distasteful and easily dislikable as was Simon Stiles, though in a far different way.

The three of them stood outside Bains's house while through the front window Lisa could see six women sitting shoulder to shoulder, fingers flying over variously

shaped pillows hung with bobbins and festooned with lace.

"Thruppence the day, ladies. Double wages for Valenciennes."

"Val—" began Meggo, glancing at Lisa mystified.

"An uncommonly fine thread," said Lisa. "It's worked in dark damp cellars and in prisons. The moist air keeps the threads from breaking. It's the easiest way known to go blind by the age of thirty."

Bains laughed, droplets of saliva losing themselves in the ruffles of his shirt. "I see you know lace, my girl."

"No Valenciennes, no blonde, no handspun," said Lisa. "Only what everybody else is working."

"Suit yourself. Thruppence the day it is."

"With board and lodging."

Bains snickered. "And where, pray tell, would I find that?"

"We've been told that it's generally part of the bargain." She nodded toward the house behind him. "Those women live there, don't they?"

"Ay, but the house is full up. You couldn't get another bed in there if you greased the sideboards." Flipping up the lid of his snuffbox, he hurled a pinch up each nostril, sneezed loudly into his handkerchief and went on. "Now, if you'd reconsider working on, let's say blonde, assuming your hands are dry enough, come winter you could have beds above one of the cow houses, work and lodging under the same roof. I might go as high as fourpence the day."

"Let's change the subject for a moment. What if I could show you a way to keep your thread clean as a whistle?" asked Lisa. "No dirt, no fingermarks." She explained the benefits of the hollow bobbin.

Bains was unimpressed. "Where in heaven's name would I get hollow bobbins? And think o' the expense!"

"The ones they're using now could be hollowed out."

"And who's to do that, pray tell, the ladies themselves? And cut their precious fingers, and waste valu-

able time? No, my girl, let the lace be worked in a trifle smudged. The piece can always be washed now, can't it?"

"What if I could show you how you could turn out ten times the amount of work in a fraction of the time?"

He leaned forward leering. "Let me smell your breath, girl."

Out of her pocket she took the sketch of the lace-making machine she had drawn for Meggo, holding it up and explaining how it worked.

"A machine, is it? You must be daft! Lace is made by hand, everybody knows that!"

"Think of ten of these operated by ten women turning out a hundred times what you're getting now."

Taking the sketch from her, he studied it.

"And who's to build this infernal contraption?"

"Any carpenter."

"Ah, and who'll pay for his labor and his materials? Angus Bains, that's who. And what if after he's made it it doesn't work?"

"It'll work."

"Will it?"

"Mr. Bains—"

"If it does, and I'm not for one second saying it would, what happens when it breaks down? It looks rickety as a crib to me. It breaks, work stops, more expense to repair it." Seizing her hand, he crumpled the paper and stuffed it into it. "Keep the silly thing, I want no part o' any machines. There's no profit in machines, and profit's all that counts with me. I'm a businessman, not a wooly-headed gamester!"

"Forget it," snapped Lisa. "I'm sorry we bothered you."

"No bother at all. But, see here, if we can't get together on lacemaking, perhaps we can work out another sort of agreement."

He reached out, grasping her left breast. She jerked back.

"You filthy pig!"

"Lisa," began Meggo timidly.

Bains's face reddened. "See here, my girl, mind your manners. You're talking to Angus Bains."

"Well, Mr. Angus Bains, you can keep your miserable thruppence a day. I wouldn't work for the likes of you for six times thruppence!"

"The devil take your insolence!" He raised his stick, pointing up the alley to the main road. "Off with you!"

"You, sir, can go to hell!"

Meggo gasped, and, tugging at Lisa's sleeve, pulled her away. They walked off, Bains's voice ringing in their ears.

"You little bitch-baggage, you dare address me in that tone! I'll see you run out of Mansfield! Slut! Whore! You dare show your face round here again, I'll see you whipped through the streets!"

At the end of the alley, they turned in the direction of the White Boar.

"Thank you, Mr. Angus Bains," said Lisa sourly, "stupid ignoramus!" Tossing the crumpled sketch in the ditch, she swore loudly.

"What do we do now?" asked Meggo.

"What we don't do is make lace at slave wages. We'll find something else."

Unhappily, an energetic search over the course of the three days following netted them nothing, save for repeated assurances that there would be plenty of work for everybody when it came harvest time.

"And what do we do between May and September?" asked Meggo disconsolately. They had returned to their room and were sitting on the edge of the bed staring glumly at the floor.

Lisa sighed. "There's one job I can take, if it's still available. Our friend Dr. Golightly."

"Oh, Lisa, you wouldn't. All that blood and gore!"

"A shilling a day is beginning to look bigger and bigger, and beggars can't be choosers."

"You don't expect he could use both of us?"

"I doubt it."

"I'll keep at it. I guess I can find something."

She found day labor, cleaning cow stalls, sweeping barns and washing floors and windows in the homes of people too lazy to wash their own. Lisa gritted her teeth and went to work for Dr. Izaak Golightly. Surprisingly, the sight of blood gushing from open wounds and incisions, the heart-rending screams of pain, the stink of rotting flesh and the view of internal organs exposed beneath the scalpel were easier getting used to than she imagined they'd be.

She began her first day by stripping the house from floors to rafters, dusting and sweeping and scrubbing every inch of space and leaving the windows gleaming like precious stones.

Every day, whether they were used or not, all the instruments were sterilized. Prior to an operation she would resterilize all those to be used, scrub down the operating table and make certain that the sheet used by the patient was freshly washed and dried in the sun.

"You're a positive fanatic about cleanliness," observed Golightly, in a tone more appreciative than derisive. "What the devil is the point?"

"The point is germs, Doctor. Bacteria."

"Bacteria?"

"Little creatures smaller than the eye can see crawling about inside and outside our bodies spreading disease and infection."

Golightly laughed uproariously. "Amazing. What an imagination. But if you can't see the blessed things, how do you know they're there?"

"I'll tell you what I can see: the difference between an amputation made with a saw that's been sterilized and one that just looks clean. You haven't had a single case of infection since I started with you."

"Agreed." Again he laughed. "What you're really saying is I shouldn't question Providence, eh?"

"Something like that."

Not only did she sustain the attack against germs, but she successfully argued him out of trephining the skulls of those of his patients who came in complaining of migraine headache.

"A good night's sleep, even if it takes a week to get to it is better than a hole in the head to let out the devils."

"I'm not letting out devils, I'm relieving pressure."

"You're making holes where there shouldn't be holes. Let it go at that!"

In a typical day they combined his skills and her common sense and determination to attack measles, swinepox, a broken leg—the result of an unscheduled and swift descent from the roof of a barn—a kneecap dislodged by the kick of a coach horse—a set of boils in and on the patient's posterior, gout, and the bite of a mad dog.

To cure the last, Golightly induced the patient to down a concoction of crushed hazel nuts, rue and garlic mashed with treacle and mixed with beer. Lisa questioned the efficacy of this somewhat unusual libation and was told it was the standard treatment for dog bite. When the patient subsequently recovered without incurring rabies, she chalked it up to the fact that the dog had not been mad in the first place.

Most of the patients were dosed with either purges or restringents—as he put it: "binding up loose systems or loosening bound ones." The parade of nostrums and medications he trotted out, each introduced with both praise and supreme confidence in their worthiness, amazed her. For every infirmity unentitled to mixtures of garlic, powdered hen's dung, balsam, calomel, theriac and earthworms, and so forth, two drops of oil of vitriol were given. Deafness, wens, cancer, wry neck and dozens of other ailments earned this magical remedy only.

One week on the job was all Lisa needed to conclude

that if the body itself had not been everybody's best and most reliable physician, the dead of Mansfield would have to have been stacked in the fields, since there wouldn't be enough able-bodied individuals remaining alive to keep up the burying.

Nevertheless, whether born of superstition or desperation, Dr. Golightly's patients had the utmost confidence in him. And for his time, for what he had to work with and what he did not have, he was, she decided, a better than average doctor.

His most valuable asset was an open mind. In practically every instance where she openly disagreed with his method or his treatment, he came round to her point of view. She even managed to persuade him to send off to nearby Sheffield for a quantity of opium.

"But I've tried opium. Every doctor has. I've treated for pain of hernia with it. The patients vomit it."

"Maybe it's too strong, too harsh on the stomach. So dilute it with water or broth, anything."

"If it's used at all, it should be used in full strength."

"Who says so?"

"Dr. Haberman in medical school."

"You went to medical school?"

"The College of Physicians in London."

"Well, forget Dr. Haberman, he doesn't know what he's talking about. I say the very least we can do is try it half-strength. If they can keep it down, it'll ease the pain and make things a good deal easier for you, too. Every time you cut somebody he starts wrenching and kicking. If it didn't hurt so they'd take it more calmly, wouldn't they? Try it, that's all I ask."

"All you ever ask is 'That's all I ask.'"

She kept after him until he ordered it and tried it diluted to a third its strength. They experimented on a patient who was brought in with a compound fracture of the hip. He drank the solution, promptly vomited it, and Golightly fed him his rosewater concoction, thrust

the stick between his quivering jaws and proceeded to set his hip to the accompaniment of a bellowing so deafening Lisa's ears rang for two hours afterward.

But her demand that they try opium turned out to be her only piece of bad advice and in the middle of her second week, he announced that she would henceforth be receiving a well-earned increase in salary: "Fifteen shillings the week, three pounds the month."



## XIII

Originally chartered by His Majesty, Richard II, nearly three hundred years earlier, their annual fair was the most eagerly anticipated event of the year for the proud people of Mansfield. Streets of booths were set up in a large rectangle covering nearly two full acres at the edge of the forest, pens and folds and other enclosures were constructed for horses, cattle, sheep and pigs, all to be exhibited and sold at auction and an abundance of foodstuffs and merchandise collected and displayed for purchase.

The music of trumpets, fiddles, drums and even a wheezing organ filled the air from morning till late at night and people came from as far as Derby to the south and Sheffield to the west to savor the delights of the week-long festivities. Lisa and Dr. Golightly were deluged with work early in the week, but on Friday evening they locked the door of the little house in Parson's Mews and, joining Meggo and the Radwells, heeded the cry of "Come, come, come to the fair."

Hawkers and auctioneers shouted loudly, the music blared, singers caterwauled, dancers shuffled, stomped and whirled and a troop of Scottish pipers puffed and squealed their best to the mystification of Timothy Radwell who observed that the bagpipes was not his instrument and that he had heard better music from a pigsty with a fox running amok in it. A small army of trained monkeys and apes danced and juggled on the high rope, bowing, pulling off their hats and somersaulting with baskets of eggs, without dropping any. And while Lisa, Meggo and the others munched tarts, downed Colchester oysters and swigged Cock Ale and small beer, they watched a dark-eyed Spanish girl dance a bolero

to clicking castanets and the strains of a guitar, a contortionist twist his limbs into knots to rouse a sailor's envy, and a fierce-faced Bulgarian gentleman lift two anvils weighing four hundred pounds with the hair of his head.

Lisa and Meggo returned the next evening and discovered a new attraction, a gaily-painted gypsy wagon with a sign showing a large hand and a crudely-lettered announcement that fortunes would be cheerfully told for sixpence within.

"Too much money for such nonsense," said Lisa.

"It's not nonsense!" exclaimed Meggo. "I knew a girl once in London who had her fortune told, and the woman said she'd come into a pile of money."

"Which she did, of course."

"Near a hundred pounds and only two days after 'twas seen in her hand. Let's do it, Lisa, please!"

"If it'll make you happy."

Two women sat in the wagon, mother and daughter, Lisa assumed from the similarity in their looks. Both were short and thickset, with heavy features, dark skin and not seven teeth between them. Their babushkas, blouses and skirts were gaudily-patterned and brightly-colored, the mother done up mostly in red and gold. Each wore a necklace fashioned of gold coins, all sorts of gold rings and bracelets and large hoop earrings, also of gold.

A little man, with most of his face devoted to beard and eyebrows, stood leaning against the rear wheel of the wagon, slicing cheese and eating it off the knife blade while at his feet a black and white mongrel, its ribcage as prominent as that of a skeleton's, lay dozing.

Seeing that Lisa and Meggo seemed interested, the two women began gesturing frantically, calling out in thick accents, urging them to climb the narrow little steps hanging from the rear of the wagon.

Getting in they were welcomed warmly and given cloth-covered kegs to sit on. Incense burned in a small

dish atop a cabinet at the rear—an odor resembling lilac—a pair of candles flickered, a gray cat posing majestically between them, and silken-covered pillows were flung about like the interior of a sheik's tent. The older woman grinned toothlessly and, rubbing her hands together, demanded sixpence from each of them. A loaf of black bread was held up by her daughter, and Meggo and Lisa thrust the coins into it, after which the mother took Meggo's hand, rubbed her palm with the tips of her fat fingers and grasping it, turned it slowly to catch the glow of the candle.

"Will I marry a rich, handsome chap?" asked Meggo.

"Sssssh," said the woman.

"Be patient," cautioned the other, flashing her black eyes. "This is very serious. It is to concentration."

"I'm sorry."

Lisa smiled inwardly. All the trappings, the cat, the candles, the incense, the loaf of bread created the ideal atmosphere for such hokum. Small wonder people took palmistry seriously, particularly with such an obvious expert as this one performing.

"Here is your lifeline. And starting from it here, your fateline. I can see that your life has been hard. There, that narrow space between the head and the heartline. Is not good. Your heart rules your head." She ran the tip of her finger down the lifeline and frowning shook her head. "Bad for you, bad."

"Will I live to be ninety?"

"I cannot see your life in numbers. The hand never shows such a thing. It is the life itself, how you live, the fullness, the goodness of it, not how long."

"Do you see happiness?"

"What is to be happy, to be less miserable? Who can be truly happy in this life, other than a child or a fool?"

"Will I marry?"

"That is not clear. It's possible."

Ignoring Meggo's future, she concentrated on the past and guessed correctly on a surprising number of traits—

Meggo's deeply religious bent, her warmth and charity, her loyalty as a friend. And her superstitious nature. But when direct questions were put to the old woman, on everything from possible future wealth to the number of children Meggo would have, she pretended not to hear and went on to another subject.

"I can tell you what you want to hear," she explained, "or the truth. Which would you like?"

"The truth, of course."

"Then do not insist on answers that are not in your hand."

"They're in the stars, dear," said Lisa.

The woman continued studying Meggo's hand in silence for fully a minute, then folded her fingers back over her palm. "That is all."

She turned to Lisa. "You." Lisa smiled tolerantly and offered her hand. "Your lifeline is very interesting. See the fork, one prong curves across to the Mount of the Moon. That is the Sign of Two Flags. You have traveled far, my child, to a foreign country."

"True."

"Your heartline also has much to tell. You have loved deeply and been loved in return. You have been very happy, but now your heart is filled with sadness. Look, it begins with this small fork on the Mount of Jupiter, luck and happiness in love. But there's something else, very strange." She raised her head and stared. "Something has happened to bring you to this sorrow." Her eyes went back to Lisa's hand. "An accident, no, it is deliberate, planned. A curse."

"Curse?"

"I see it. This line, from the Mount of Mercury to the Mount of Jupiter is broken. See it? And you are in the break."

"Witchcraft," whispered Meggo in an awed tone. "I knew it!"

The woman nodded. "A witch's curse, yes." She

tapped Lisa's hand. "It is caused by a malign influence, the devil's work."

"I don't know any witch."

"You don't have to, she knows you." She drew her finger around the thumb. "The Line of Mars. Powerful inner forces guard and support you in this time of sorrow. I see danger for you as well. It is clear."

"Anything else?"

"Why look for more? You have enough to deal with without adding to it."

"Your eyes don't believe," said the other woman.

"I'm afraid I don't believe in witchcraft."

"You believe what has happened to you, you must. You cannot deny the truth. And the devil or one of his legions is behind it."

"What's happened to me? Tell me."

"Why bother. You already know."

"Then how did it happen?"

"Please." The woman yawned. "That is all. It is late, I am tired. Good night."

"I told you! I told you!" said Meggo gleefully. "It is witchcraft, I knew it all the time!"

They had returned to the inn and all the way back she had kept up a relentless assault on the subject. Entering the room, Lisa flung herself on the bed. Meggo stood over her, hands on hips, babbling excitedly.

"Just because you don't believe in witchcraft doesn't mean there's no such thing, you know!"

Lisa shut her voice out of hearing and turned the episode over in her mind. Whether or not there was anything in what the gypsy had told her she, Lisa, could not ignore the obvious and the logic of the old woman's explanation, that she was where she was through some influence, some power beyond her understanding. And thinking beyond that, there was something else honesty obliged her to concede. She had awakened in Janet

Stiles's body in shock and dismay, but within the hour had determined to discover what lay behind this outrage, who was responsible and how it might be undone. Then, as the days piled one behind the other, her resolve had given way to hope which in turn had been diluted into passive wishing for a miracle. And within the past few hours, she had been tempted to disavow even that remote possibility.

Now this. Was it a miracle fallen into her lap? Was perception all that was needed to recognize it? A witch indeed. She'd never even seen one, let alone known one. At that, had a witch come within a mile of her at Blackwood, big sister Lavinia would have captured her bodily and sent her flying off on her besom!

Witch or no, from the first moment the gypsy woman had impressed her as both shrewd and intelligent. She'd been very careful as to what she said and how she phrased it. There had been no outlandish claims for good fortune or happiness or warnings of their contraries, for that matter. When unable to answer a question directly, she chose to change the subject and her characterization of Meggo had been uncannily accurate.

Meggo talked on, scolding her for refusing to acknowledge the "plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face" power behind her problem. Lisa held up her hand and studied it by the light of the moon—the mounts, the lines, and the break in the line between the Mount of Mercury and the Mount of Jupiter. A tiny, easily overlooked flaw in the life pattern of her hand? Or had it been fixed in the womb, a physical characteristic with no more significance than the weight of her earlobes? She could be skeptical. She could take it all as so much drivel. She could discount the gypsy's words and ignore Meggo's urging.

She could, but she was in no position to do so. She nevertheless wished the woman had been more definite. Still, wasn't that their way? "For sixpence we'll light a

tiny flame under your interest, for six shillings fan it large and for six pounds your world, past, present and future will be paraded before your eyes. Simply close them and listen."

"Who do you know might be a witch?" asked Meggo.

"Not a soul."

"They're terribly clever, you know, at hiding it."

"Meggo—"

"I knew one once, an old lady with warts all over her nose and chin hairs long as your finger. She kept a fat spaniel without any legs and everybody said he sucked the blood from her witch's teat. She could look into a well and poison it."

"The evil eye."

"Both eyes!" Kneeling beside the bed, she took hold of her shoulders. "You are going back to talk more with her, though, aren't you? Say you will!"

"I will, I have no choice."

"Ask her about Simon."

"That, too."

"I've had my palm read dozens of times and she's the best I've ever seen. She knew everything about me! It's shuddery to see someone with that kind of power. I'll bet she can turn lime into gold!"

"She didn't have much to say about your future."

"They can't, not really. You know what the Bible says: the secret things belong unto the Lord, our God."

Lisa recalled that most gypsies prided themselves on their ability to predict the future, but she resisted commenting. "Let's go to bed."

"Let's. I'm done washing Old Man Baird's windows so I must find more work tomorrow. I shall have to be up with the birds."

## XIV

True to her word, Meggo was up, dressed and gone before Lisa woke up the next morning. Lisa was due in Parson's Mews at eight o'clock, but the bell atop St. Jude's generously gave her a half-hour's free time, tolling half-past seven as she left the inn carrying all the money, some three pounds ten.

She headed for the fair grounds. It was the last day in May, and the previous night had left a nip in the air but a butter-yellow sun flooding the horizon toward Lincoln and the sea beyond it promised a warm and pleasant day. A gossamer haze hung over the fields and the lowing of cattle in the pasture beyond the grounds carried over the air like music. The fair itself was awakening to prepare for the day. Clutching her shawl about her she made her way between two rows of booths to the large oak tree beneath which the gypsy wagon had stood the night before.

But there was no sign of it. She stopped a vigorous-looking older man passing by carrying two buckets of grain, catching his sleeve.

"What's happened to the gypsy wagon?"

"'Tain't there, plain as the eye can see."

A round-eyed, dirty-faced woman standing in front of a booth hung with cloth and leather belts called to her: "They was sent packing by the constables, the thieving monkeys. Left last night, they did."

"Where did they go?"

The woman pointed down the road toward the south. "To Arnold, likely."

"They're daft if they have," commented the man with the buckets. "Pugh's the law there. He's a bad 'un. Clap you in jail if you look at him cross-eyed. He'll nae run



'em out, he'll lock 'em up and burn their wagon, he will!"

"Does anyone here have a horse I might borrow? I'll pay."

The man nodded down the line. "Ask Mr. Featherstone, down where the mares are fenced in. But he'll nae ha' nae carriage."

"Thank you."

She got a horse, a powerfully-built mare, as black as pitch, with a dirty-white mane and a seeming willingness to leap every wall and fence in sight, so spirited was she. Paying and mounting up, she set out for Arnold at a gallop.

It was about twelve miles, a distance easily covered in much less than an hour. She would be late for work, but the doctor would understand. Or would he? How would she explain her tardiness? Blame it on the fact that she was involved in tracking down a gypsy who was going to help her find a witch? Better she tell him she'd overslept.

She guessed she was within three or four miles of Arnold, the horse thundering over the narrow dirt road, its flanks gleaming with sweat, its great lungs gulping in the clean, sweet morning air, when a small wagon appeared ahead. It was a tinker's wagon, its interior festooned with pots and pans clinking and clanking from their pegs, moving slowly along. Passing it, she reined up, hailing the driver perched on his high seat, wearing a thick jerkin of tanned leather and linsey-woolsey trousers. He pulled to a stop and tipped his cap in greeting, showing a pate as bald and shining as a waxed wooden ball.

"Mornin' to you, miss."

She returned his greeting and asked if he had seen the gypsy wagon. He had not and, like the old man back at the fairgrounds, expressed serious doubt that Arnold's Mr. Pugh would "abide their invading his precious domain."

"I didn't notice any side roads, but they could have turned off, couldn't they?"

"Into the forest, yes. They do that, you know. 'Tis safe for 'em there. They can poach and light a fire and cook and carry on with their mischief without too much worry over the Mr. Pughs o' this world."

"Thank you."

"Your servant, miss."

She retraced her way, holding the mare to a walk, edging along the dense forest, squinting into the trees. Halfway back to Mansfield, she spied a wisp of smoke curling up from within the greenwood. By this time the sun was up in earnest, building heat, rousing the flies from their slumber and setting them whirling and buzzing while the meadow on the other side of the road filled the air with the music of the crickets and katydids and other tiny creatures claiming it for their kingdom. It would be cool in the woods, she thought, but dark and perhaps treacherous. She recalled the hairy little cheese-eater leaning against the rear wheel of the wagon the night before. There was evil in his eyes, and she remembered thinking at sight of him that the knife in his fist had undoubtedly cut more than cheese in its day.

But she had to see the gypsy again; there were so many questions she had to have answered. And she must remember to ask about Simon.

Reining the horse in the direction of the fire, she threaded her way through the trees. The wagon was parked in a clearing some fifty feet in, the cheese lover down on his knees feeding twigs and branches to a small fire, while another man, much taller and powerful looking, with well-muscled arms, climbed down the tailgate of the wagon, letting the rear curtain fall concealing the interior. He turned as the man at the fire looked up at her.

"Get out of here!" snapped the bigger man, glowering.

"I must see her."

"Go!"

"Wait," cut in the other, and moving quickly to her horse, grabbed the bridle. "You want your fortune told again? You got money? Two crowns!"

"Let go of my bridle!" He did so. She dismounted, fastened the reins to a nearby branch and standing beside the horse, glared at one, then the other. "My business is with her. Tell her I'm here."

It wasn't necessary. Hearing the discussion from inside the wagon, both women appeared, holding back the two sides of the curtain and gesturing greeting. Seconds later, the required ten shillings was imbedded in the bread and the old woman prepared to talk. In response to Lisa's appeal for elaboration, she proceeded to witches and curses and spells and the powers of darkness, talking so knowledgeably that Lisa half suspected that she herself was in the Devil's service. This, however, she kept to herself, letting the woman warm to her subject.

"Would I be right in saying that whatever a witch does can be reversed by her or by another?"

"That is right," said the gypsy, "unless whatever it may be is destroyed, broken into pieces which cannot be put back together again. Anything destroyed by fire is gone for good, too."

"Could you undo this thing that's been done to me?"

"Probably, if I were a witch. But I'm not."

"Go on."

"After you left last night, we were ordered to leave Mansfield. We did. I fell asleep here on the pillows and I had a dream. A very strange dream about you. I don't understand all of it, but you may."

"Tell me."

"I saw your face as clearly as I see it now. Not your body, only your face, hanging in darkness as if suspended from an invisible thread. Your blonde hair, your eyes gray as moonstones, your white cheeks. No mistake, it was you. Then a strange thing happened. Suddenly there was fire burning in a circle all around your

face, not touching you but around you, like the frame around a picture. And no sooner did the fire start when your face faded and another took its place."

"Whose?"

"Perhaps you know. She had red hair, almost as red as the fire around it, big green eyes and pink skin." Lisa gasped. "You know her?"

"Go on."

"I saw her very clearly, then she too faded and you came back. You do know her, don't you?"

"Yes."

"A friend or an enemy, which?"

"First tell me the rest of the dream."

"I've seen that ring of fire before in my dreams. It is like a wall surrounding one, imprisoning. How, I wondered, could you get out and she in? It doesn't make sense. Does it to you?" She paused. "Unless you have the power to change your looks."

"Somebody seems to have such power."

Lisa told her everything, from the trip to Westerly to their arrival in Mansfield. The two women listened in manifest fascination and when she had finished her story, the older one snapped her fingers.

"My box, Magda."

Her daughter went to the cabinet in the rear, bringing out a small metal chest inlaid with bits of colored glass cut to resemble jewels. Using a key on a slender gold chain hanging around her neck, the woman unlocked the chest taking out a pearl the size of a pea.

"If you want the answer—"

"I do, you know I do!"

"You must go to London. You must find Elison Beecher there. She is the Mother Damnable of all the city's witches. She has great power in the black arts. It is said that she has been to hell, not once but three times, that Lucifer himself chose her from among all others to bear his child. But be on your guard. She can

be your friend and help you or make you her enemy and destroy you."

"Where in London is she?"

"You know the city?"

"Not very well."

"You must find Tilt Yard off King Street, south of Charing Cross. Elison has a shop there, a little hole in the wall."

"What sort of shop?"

"She sells herbs, red balm, burrage, corduus, everything. The sign out front says Tilt Yard Herbarium and under it is the name N. Fears. Can you remember that?" Lisa nodded and repeated Elison Beecher's name and the rest of it. "When you locate her, introduce yourself. Tell her your story, exactly as you've told it to us."

"Do you think she'll believe me?"

"Give her this pearl and tell her my name, Klovka."

"Klovka?"

"The gypsy." She pressed the pearl in her hand and smiled warmly. "It tells her that I believe you and that she may also. It is the pearl of faith and honor. Inside is blood taken from an unborn child." Lisa shook the pearl. "Do not bother, you can't feel it, you can't hear it. But she can. You will give it to her as a token of my faith in you. She will get it back to me, never fear."

"I'm very grateful."

"You must watch your every step, everyone you meet, in everything you do. London is filled with evil. You must mind your purse and your body, else they will find you robbed and raped and face down in a ditch. As soon as you get there, go to—"

"Tilt Yard, and the Tilt Yard Herbarium, with N. Fears on the lower part of the sign. I find Elison Beecher, tell her Klovka the gypsy sent me and give her this."

"Good girl."

"May I ask you something else?"

"You are getting a good deal for your measly two crowns," muttered the younger woman sourly.

"Speak."

She asked about Simon. The woman searched her hand, but shook her head. "If you are to meet him it will not be soon. There is nothing of him in your hand. But there is something else you should know, very important. Your friend—"

"Meggo?"

"She is doomed."

Lisa started. "You can't mean that."

"Her time is short."

"You must be mistaken!"

"I saw it all last night. I did not have the heart to tell her. Can you?"

"But knowing, it can be prevented, can't it? Whatever the cause, I mean."

The woman shook her head. "She is to die very soon. The curve around the Mount of Venus is very short and breaks off sharply. There is nothing you or anyone can do. What is in the hand. . . ."

"She'll be coming to London with me. Perhaps Elison Beecher can help her."

"Perhaps. She has amazing powers. It is said that she can turn water into blood and even bring the dead to life. I have heard that she dated the death of your King James, marking the minute of the hour of the day on the trunk of a tree in Southwark. It was her curse that killed him, in revenge for his denouncing witchcraft in his book, *Daemonologia*. Those were bad times for witches, back years ago."

"Klovka, I'm deeply indebted to you."

"You have my sympathy. You are not to blame for this that you find yourself in. She will help you. Good-bye and God's eye on you. His and the Devil's."

Lisa mounted her horse and made her way back to the Mansfield road, although not before the cheese-lover

had demanded and been given an additional pound. She was only too happy to pay.

Once on the road, however, doubt overtook her. The pearl looked genuine, but then she was no expert in judging the value of such things. It could be as false as the glass jewels encrusting the chest out of which Klovka had taken it. Or as false as the promise of assistance from Elison Beecher the old woman had claimed it would assure. And yet why should she lead her on with false hope, to what purpose? Such an effort would be unnecessarily cruel.

She thought about Meggo. She must stick very close to her, watch her as a mother watches a small child. She was too good, too kind-hearted and decent to be cut down so early in life.

Heeling the horse, she hurried it along, wondering how Meggo would take the news that the small sum of money they had between them was now reduced by more than thirty shillings.

## XV

The bell atop St. Jude's introduced Mansfield to seven o'clock as Meggo departed the White Boar, turning down the side of the newly whitewashed building and making her way up the hill toward the Baird house. She would collect what the old man owed her, inquire if there was any other work he needed done and if not, go looking for something, anything that would turn the day to a profit.

The path became narrower as she climbed, the inn and the buildings on either side sinking behind her. She passed a dilapidated stone barn, its door ajar, hanging from a single hinge, the roof in need of thatching, here and there a slender shaft of sunlight piercing it and dropping through the darkness to the floor.

"Meggo?"

The sound of her name touched the nape of her neck, spreading icy fingers of fear around either side. A hand emerged from the darkness, pulling her bodily inside the barn.

"Darling dear, it's me. Give us a welcome kiss!" He pulled her close to him, his wet lips finding her mouth. She shrank from him, but he held her tightly. "Over here in the light, love. Let's have a look at you. My, but you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Let go, Mr. Simon."

"Here, is that any way to greet an old friend, after me coming all this way, scouring the bloody countryside looking for you?" His eyes narrowed menacingly and the false warmth deserted his voice. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"You know who, you slut, my beloved sister. Where is the thieving wench?"



"I don't know."

"Not much you don't!" Tightening his grip on her arm until she cried out in pain, he jerked her to one side and back. "Let's have it."

"We left Blyth together, yes, but there was a mix-up in Hull and we got separated we did."

"Did you now?"

"I got lost. She got on a Wakefield coach thinking I'd gone ahead, I shouldn't wonder. She wanted to catch up, you see. But I hadn't, I mean, we were separated and that's the last I saw of her."

"You're a liar!"

"It's the truth, so help me!"

"You poor bitch, you don't even know how to lie. You can't, your eyes give you away. Every time you turn your miserable tongue they roll up in your head like a dead man's!" Letting loose her arm, he pushed her down into the hay. "She's here all right, but she don't know I am, so we've no worry she'll run. We've time enough for her." He began fumbling at the string of his breeches. "Up your skirt, there's a good girl. Spread 'em wide. I got something hard and pleasing for ye."

Rolling over, she shot to her feet, brushing wisps of hay from her skirt and backing away into the darkness. "Don't you touch me."

"What's this? Do my ears deceive me?"

"I don't do it anymore. I'm a lady now, I am."

"And ladies don't do it?" He laughed loudly. "That's priceless, kitchen scum like you calling yourself a lady. All right, enough shenanigans. Get it over here where I can have at it!"

"Don't you dare touch me! I'll scream!"

"You do and you're dead!"

She had started edging toward the open door, but he grabbed her arm, pulling her back, slamming the door with his free hand.

"Over here in the light, my darling dear. That's

better. Come now, simmer down, stop shaking like a schoolgirl. You've had more meat up your thighs than the queen o' the whores, because you love it. Don't you! Poor bitch, you can't get enough of it! I want you to do the whole game for me, sweet miss, work me up, get me ready and—"

"No!"

Seizing her shoulders, he threw her down hard, pulling his full weight up over her. "Yes. And when you're through pleasuring me, we'll see a bit o' blood trickling out o' your mouth. That's another thing you love, a dose o' punching about. Then you'll straighten your hair and your rags and you'll take me to her highness."

"I won't! You can't make me!"

Again he laughed. Freeing one hand, she brought it up over her head and down upon his forehead, fingers rigid, nails stabbing into the flesh above his left eye, pulling downward over the eye, scratching the pupil, ripping the lower lid, the blood spurting down onto her cheek.

"Bitch! I'll kill you!"

Clutching her hair, he began shaking her head violently, then twisting it from side to side, the pain lancing through his eye driving him into a towering rage. A loud crack stopped him abruptly. For an instant he froze, then he let go of her head. It fell to the floor like a rag doll's, lolling to one side awkwardly.

"Meggo?" Touching her cheek hesitantly, he slipped his fingertips under it, lifting it, watching in horror as her face came up, mouth gaping, eyes staring blankly. Then it fell to the other side. "Here now, what is it? What you trying to do to old Simon? Say something, darling dear. Meggo?"

Panic seized him and he glanced about, eyes darting like a wolf at bay. He looked upward, spying the loft directly overhead.

## XVI

Walking back from the fairgrounds, Lisa came in sight of the White Boar and saw Dr. Golightly and Timothy Radwell standing in the doorway in conversation. The doctor appeared impatient; he would be cross with her, she could be sure, she was nearly forty minutes late for work. As she was coming from the other end of the village it was obvious she hadn't overslept.

"Good morning," she said pleasantly.

They exchanged glances and now that she was closer to them she could see that what she had taken for impatience on the doctor's face was concern.

"Where have you been?" asked Radwell. "We looked all over for you."

"At the fair. I'm sorry, Doctor, I'm afraid I got to talking and lost all track of time."

Golightly gestured at the wooden bench alongside the door. "Sit. We have some distressing news. Something's happened to Meggo."

"She's dead."

He stared. "How did you know that?" Sitting beside her, he placed his hand over hers. "Steady."

"What happened?"

"An accident," said Radwell. "She fell and struck her head."

"Where is she?"

"Come," said the doctor.

They went inside to a rear room reserved for private parties. A few chairs and stools stood about and in the center was a long table. Meggo's body had been laid upon it, a sheet covering her. The doctor drew it back revealing her face. Her forehead and the right side of her face down to her jaw had been caved in, and her

right shoulder badly broken, the bone protruding horribly, piercing the flesh under her blouse.

"God in heaven!" Lisa turned from the sight, covering her face with her hands.

"Some boys playing found her on the floor of Taggert's barn, up the hill behind the inn," said Radwell quietly. "She seems to have fallen from the loft."

The doctor nodded. "There's no telling what she was doing up there, but she must have slipped."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't believe that. I doubt she's ever been up in a loft in her life." Steeling herself, she pulled the sheet down to Meggo's waist.

"We did wonder about that," said Radwell guardedly. "What would she be wanting in the barn? Taggert hadn't hired her, we checked so we know."

Lisa examined the body, the head, the hideous bruise covering the entire side of the face, her neck and shoulder. Her eyes wandered down her breast, pausing at her left hand. She picked it up.

"Look at her fingernails."

Radwell nodded. "Dirt."

"Blood."

"It is," said Golightly, examining her fingers closely.

"This was no accident. Someone attacked her and she fought back. Someone murdered her, then tried to make it look like an accident."

"Who would do such a ghastly thing?" asked Radwell in a bewildered tone. He was very upset, his cheeks ashen, his voice scarcely audible. "Folks in Mansfield are peaceful. Things like this don't happen." He paused and looked at her, as if in the hope she could explain it for him. Momentarily lost in thought, she paid no attention. Then she spoke to the doctor.

"May I see the barn?"

"Of course."

A crowd had gathered in and around the barn. The doctor opened the door wide, letting in as much day-

light as possible. He indicated the place on the floor where the body had been discovered. A single large spot of blood stained the rough floor and darkened tiny wisps of straw within its edge. She looked upward at the loft, then at the ladder fixed to the wall at the far end and leading upward to it.

"She could have been killed down here, carried up to the loft and thrown down," she said.

"Possibly," said Golightly.

"Probably."

"Things like this simply don't happen in Mansfield," said Radwell, shaking his head and frowning. "It's horrible, just horrible!"

"Let's go back," said Lisa. "I must talk to you both privately. I've something important to tell you, then you can draw your own conclusions about all this."

On the bench in front of the inn, she revealed how Meggo and she had fled Blyth, taking part of Simon Stiles's money.

"You never told us you had a brother," said Radwell.

"A black-sheep brother, I'm afraid, not the sort one brings up in friendly conversation. We were mortally afraid of him, and after he attacked me I decided we should make a break for it. We needed money, of course, so I took some from his cashbox. We started out and eventually arrived here in Mansfield."

"Why stop here, of all places?" inquired the doctor.

"Why not? As Timothy once said, one place is as good as another. Also, we couldn't afford to spend everything we had on traveling. We thought we'd gotten away with it, away from him."

"You think he's responsible for this monstrous business?" asked Radwell.

"I'm sure of it. I can't prove it, of course, not yet certainly, but I'd bet my life he did it. He's the sort who puts a very high value on revenge."

"Assuming he did it, he's probably gone into hiding," said the doctor, "which means you'd best be careful."

She laughed mirthlessly. "I'd best be five hundred miles from here, and as fast as I can make them."

Radwell shook his head in disagreement. "You start running, he'll catch you for certain. Sooner or later he has to. But if you stick here, you'll have practically the entire village to protect you."

"I can't do that. I can't make my troubles Mansfield's. It wouldn't be fair, you've all been much too good to us."

"Maybe we're shooting off in the wrong direction," said the doctor. "Allowing that he did murder her, I'll wager he's twenty miles out of town by now. I know I'd be."

"Not Simon. I'm the one he's after, not Meggo. I'm the one he has to even the score with. She just happened to get in the way."

"What are you going to do?" asked Radwell.

"I have to go to London."

"Oh no!" snapped Golightly. "That's the last place you'll go!"

"I must."

"No, you don't! Leave if you like, we can't stop you. Great God, you're the last female I'd attempt to stop doing anything. But I beg you, not London. Never!"

"I tell you I have to go."

"You don't understand, the plague is there. It's bad and getting worse, spreading like wildfire. There's no way they can stop it. The bills of mortality are getting longer than your arm, and with warmer weather coming people will be dying like flies! I've heard the bill for last week in St. Giles alone listed forty dead, nearly four hundred for the whole city! They're searching the houses now and finding it everywhere, both sides of the river."

"I'll have to take my chances."

"You don't, damn it! It's no chance, any more than taking a razor to your wrists! For God's sakes, be reasonable!"

"Izaak, you're only making it harder."

He had become furious, throwing his arms about, his cheeks crimson with anger. "Damn it, woman, I'm not making it anything, it's you! How can you be so stupid!"

"I'm going to London and that is that!"

"You're mad, completely! All right, where in London?"

"South of Charing Cross."

"The heart of the city! Magnificent! Let me tell you something, by next week there won't be a house you can get into or out of, the streets'll be filled with corpses, there'll be looting and rape and murder; it'll be a living hell!"

Radwell took her by the arm. "What do you have to do there? What's it all about?"

"I have important business."

"So wait," snapped the doctor, "at least until fall. It's possible the cold weather may kill it."

"I can't wait. I've got to leave now, today."

"You'd go before she's buried?" asked Radwell.

Lisa hesitated. "Tomorrow morning then."

"It's not my business, but I agree with Izaak completely. To go there now is absolutely insane. Is there nothing we can say to change your mind?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You'll need money," said the doctor in a defeated tone.

"I've enough."

"I'm sure, what—two pounds?" He brought out a five-pound note. "Take this."

"No. I appreciate it, but—"

"Take it! If you don't, I'll cram it down your throat, if I can get it by that unstoppable red rag of a tongue, that is!"

She accepted the note. "Thank you, Doctor."

"I don't expect we shall ever see you again."

"I don't know."

"It's very generous of you, I must say, leaving me in

the lurch like this. On my own, with no one to so much as boil a pot of water, let alone mother our patients. Our patients, yours and mine."

"I'm sure you'll be all right. You know you're a good doctor, Doctor."

"I've money for you, too, child," said Radwell. "You've taken his, you've got to take mine."

"I'd rather not."

"I'll brook no argument." He glanced at her appealingly. "When you finish what you have to do will you get word back to us? We'll want to know if you're all right."

"I shall, I promise." She paused, looking from one to the other and back, then kissed each of them on the cheek, squeezing their hands affectionately. "I love you both. I shall miss you dreadfully. Try not to be too upset with me. I'm not a child, I'm not a fool. I know what I'm letting myself in for. I wouldn't go if I didn't need to. And I do, desperately."

"Then go," said the doctor, "now. If your dear brother is out to get you, you'll be safer in a coach and on your way. I doubt if he'll suspect you're heading for London. Who in his right mind would be? There's just one thing. I want you to take along a remedy."

"What?"

"A large onion hollowed out and filled with fig, rue and Venice treacle."

"Doctor—"

"Scoff if you like, but it's recommended by the College of Physicians. It may very well save your life and it'll certainly protect you from some of the more repulsive and totally useless so-called preventives and cures."

"Thank you, I appreciate it. But I still say fleas cause plague and I intend to stave it off by staying as clean as possible. I'll take a bath every day, two if I can."

Golightly shook his head. "My dear, the water in London is nothing like ours here. You find yourself within twenty feet of water there, the stink'll tie your



nose in a knot. The last thing you'll want is a London bath."

"We'll see to Meggo," said Radwell. "I promise we'll give her a good Christian burial."

"Not just a winding sheet, please," she said soberly. "I couldn't bear the thought of that. She must have a coffin."

The doctor nodded. "She will."

"I'll pack my things and get the noon coach for Leicester. With luck I can be in London by the day after tomorrow."

"Luck?" Golightly shook his head and clucked disapprovingly.

She thanked both again, kissed them again and, going upstairs to the room found Meggo's rosary beads; she brought them down to the room where Meggo lay. Turning the sheet down, she wound the beads around her hands, positioning the crucifix neatly. Then she kissed her.

"Good-bye, Megan O'Donaugh. God grant you a better lot where you're going. Wherever it is, it'll be a better place for your being there. I shall miss you, Meggo, your beautiful soul, your smile, your warmth and friendship, your sweetness that made even the worst times bearable. I'll be lost alone, Meggo. Promise you'll watch over me. God bless you, and let you rest, dear, dear Meggo."

**BOOK THREE**  
**THE VIGIL**

## I

He kissed her passionately, abandoning the last shred of reticence and with it any suggestion of lingering conscience. The warmth of his chest against her heaving breasts spread like a velvet blanket, enfolding her entirely and it was all she could do to keep from crying out in exultation. For this was the moment she had waited for, her time of triumph, the cup raised in victory, the campaign of conquest completed. At last he was hers, every inch of his lean and supple body, his fire, his strength, his love. Luxuriating in possession, she found his hand, moving it downward, mutely encouraging him to begin.

Wrenched back to reality by the sound of Mody scratching the rug at the foot of the bed, Lavinia drew her eyes from the ceiling, and, throwing aside the counterpane, got out of bed. Gathering Mody in her arms, she stood at the window gazing out at the new morning, the garden littered with dead roses, silvered with hoarfrost, the wrought-iron gate in its frosted skin looking fittingly sepulchral. Beyond the wall trees straggled up to the near grounds like a crowd of peasants, some more forward than others, approaching the king's castle. Almost completely shorn of their foliage, their trunks and branches glistened with the frost, as did the blankets of leaves overlaying the ground surrounding them.

She stroked Mody's head, eliciting an appreciative purring, his muzzle rising, inviting her fingertips to his throat to caress and fondle it.

"It's going too slowly, beautiful brute. Like a flower holding back, refusing to blossom. Or is it me, Mody? Is Ledion right, am I too restless? Is it because I want it so badly that I can't stand this waiting, waiting, waiting?"

She considered the situation. Escorted by Craven and a covey of his fellows from the hospital, all of whom gave the appearance of small boys in the presence of their idol, Augustus Waller—"Hippocrates from abroad"—had arrived at Blackwood to be ushered to the patient's bedside. She, Ross, Cyrus and Hedridge had been among those standing silently by watching Waller. The great one's performance had been less than impressive. Questioning Craven in a barely audible voice, he had peered and peeked and gently probed, scratched his shaggy head repeatedly, looking properly sagacious and serious as he did so. But though he conducted himself in a highly professional manner he was unable to add anything to the small sum of knowledge already accumulated. There were a few "it could bes" and two or three "it strikes me thats" and even an "it's definitely not," but nothing approaching a declaration pinpointing the cause and thereby opening the way to cure. He beat about the bush of "I don't know" with impressive nimbleness, but when it was over and he was on his way out the door Lavinia decided that he was probably sorry that he'd ever left Philadelphia in the first place.

In a way it was ludicrous; the combined efforts of all the doctors continued so ineffectual, so totally worthless that one and all might better have stayed clear of Blackwood and continued to concentrate on the curables and those with pretended illnesses at the hospital. Still, Waller's failure to diagnose Lisa's illness neither helped nor hurt Lavinia's cause. The patient's condition was stable and would remain so, according to Ledion who had gotten it from Settle. More important was Ross's condition. The deeper he plunged into work at the yards, the more he learned of ships and the building of them, the further he seemed to drift from life outside the yards. Coming home at night he would go at once to the master bedroom to sit beside Lisa, his hands over hers, his eyes staring at her pityingly. It became a ritual, a

sort of call to duty which his conscience commanded of him. The pathetic futility of it, the time wasted in keeping vigil over a porcelain doll night after night struck Lavinia as increasingly foolish. Nevertheless, there were signs of change in his attitude. His frustration over the situation, which had been so evident in the beginning—the rambling bitter comments, the eternal pacing—diminished as time went on. And his “hoping against hope” having brought no results, he appeared to be on the verge of resigning himself to the patent uselessness of what had come to be little more than emotional exercise. At that, what hope was he offered? He had seen the best available doctor examine her and fail in even attempting to diagnose. Wouldn't this have to be the last straw, or close to it? Regardless of how often and how determinedly he had told himself that he could never abandon hope entirely, he must at least be flirting with the idea.

She made very certain that when he got home from the yards he would always walk into the room to find her seated by the bed, keeping the vigil for him. He was very grateful for this, telling her over and over how much her loyalty meant to him, how deeply he appreciated her. To turn gratitude into love was the trick, preferably to induce him to do the turning. However much she would have wanted to, she could not make him fall in love. That had to be self-initiated.

For reasons undisclosed to Lavinia, Waller and Craven agreed that Lisa should remain at the house, at least for the present. Assured by Ledion that moving her would have no effect upon her condition, Lavinia had changed her mind about the value of doing so. The point was if Lisa were hospitalized, Ross would probably spend less time sitting silently beside the bed brooding over the situation. Removing her from the house might nudge him into giving up the ghost that much faster.

There was another way to hurry him along. Frankin-

cense and asafetida burnt together on a piece of charcoal made a very potent purifier, more frankincense than asafetida, a little piece of the latter enough. Ideally, it was best to disrobe completely in the presence of a small bowl of burning incense, then make contact with the powers of one's choice and enlist their aid in turning his attentions upon her. But the more she thought about it, the more the necessary preparations seemed overly complicated. Instead of purification, she could go directly to a love potion, one designed to permeate his physical being and bring him, so to speak, to romantic heel.

She was familiar with many love potions, most of them worthless, held in repute only by witches who had never even put them to the test. There was one, however, that to her knowledge had never failed. It was widely used throughout Europe, particularly in Hungary and Romania, and in the Orient. The only problem with it was that from what she had heard it was only used to turn a woman to love, not a man. Even so, if she tried it and it did fail, there'd be no harm in that. She could always try something else.

She spent most of the day in Lisa's room sitting by the bed reading to herself. Late in the afternoon, she went downstairs to the study and closing the double doors leading to the living room to insure privacy, approached the lower drawer in Ross's gun cabinet. Picking the lock with a hairpin, she opened the drawer and selected one of his pistols along with six cartridges for it. The weapon was a three-year old Walker, .44 caliber, weighing better than four-and-a-half pounds. To fire it, she would have to hold it with both hands. She detested firearms. Actually, she was frightened of them, never having fired one of any sort. But in this instance she had no choice.

Stealing a small knife from a kitchen drawer behind the cook's back, she collected a candle and an empty can from the refuse bin and putting on her cloak set out

for the woods. Following the path leading toward the oaks encircling the sabat site, she turned off before coming in view of them, pushing through the leafless underbrush to within sight of the split stone. The sun lay low in the west, sending golden corridors through the trees pointing the way to her destination and an ill-defined V of snow geese honked raucously by overhead. Entering the split in the stone, she lit the candle and started down the steeply inclined floor of the cave. The stink of putrid flesh filled her nostrils, but, ignoring it, she pressed forward, holding the candle over her head, squinting into the blackness.

The yellow eye caught the light, absorbing it and casting it back. The wolf growled as it loped slowly forward. Its head appeared and it showed its fangs. Stooping, she jammed the candle into the soft ground upright and dropping to both knees brought the loaded pistol up. Aiming at the eye, she pulled the trigger. Shot after shot rang out, echoing loudly until the cylinder was empty, the trigger clicking harmlessly. Dropping the pistol, she picked up the candle and examined the wolf lying on its side, drenched with blood, as if its skull was smashed in by a hammer.

Taking out the knife, she began cutting small clumps of hairs from the creature's cheeks and eyebrows, bathing her hands with blood. Then she cut more hair from under its chin. Satisfied that she had enough, she next turned her attention to his privates.

## II

Outside the cave, she gathered a few dried twigs and branches, covered them with leaves and made a fire. On it she set the can holding the freshly cut genitals of the wolf and its hairs. She stood by patiently waiting for them to burn to ashes, then allowed a few more minutes to let the can cool enough to be able to hold it before she started back to the house. Her heart raced! She could scarcely wait to see the effect the potion would have upon him!

The fire had reduced the contents of the can to a little more than two tablespoons of fine black ashes. More than enough for her needs. She would give it to him in his coffee in the morning. It would work on him during the day and by nightfall, after his half-hour or so beside Lisa's bed, after conversation in the living room with Cyrus and herself, he would go to bed. Lying there, his desire for intercourse would increase by the minute. Give him twenty minutes or so alone, then go to his room with a glass of sherry—to help him sleep—and let nature take its carefully prescribed course.

It never failed to amuse her. It wasn't the sense of power one had over the ungifted, the helpless unanointed majority, it was the ridiculous ease with which one could cast a charm or a spell. The correct formula judiciously applied rarely failed to render even the most obstinate nonbeliever as helpless as a crippled dog. It was common knowledge that witches and sorcerers in the early days of the Inquisition had been able to carry red-hot metal bars in their bare hands without harm so as to prove their innocence. All it took was a bit of red arsenic made with the juice of Housleake and the gall of a bull. Wiping one's hands with it afforded



complete protection. Or a bit of exmagne and alum lamenti combined with strong vinegar and great mallows or hollyhocks would work just as effectively.

Dyson Phillips, a friend of Erica's, had been unable to conceive. She had taken powdered deer horn, mixed it with cow's gall and put it in a small cloth sack on a string around her neck. Within one year she had given birth to twin sons.

Lavinia postponed administering the potion for one day to give her time to rethink her strategy. Some sort of distraction would help matters. With this in mind, she went into town and bought a jar of Chivers marmalade. At breakfast the next morning, she brought the tray in from the kitchen herself. She and Ross were the only ones at the table, Cyrus sleeping late, as had become his custom.

There was a problem at the yards which even Ross's favorite marmalade was no help for.

"The new ship for Baldwin & Baldwin. It's within six days of completion; now suddenly they tell us they want to back out of the contract."

"Is something the matter with the ship?"

"Not a thing, she's a beauty."

"Then what's their reason?"

"Progress. My guess is they've had their fill of clippers. Just this past week the *Sea Lady* lost two topmasts in a squall off the Azores and came limping in four days behind schedule. More than likely somebody building steam saw their chance, got to the Baldwins, and convinced them that future shipping will be all pressure and pistons."

"But if they signed a contract—"

"Vinnie, they're just about our best customers, certainly the oldest on the books. If we hold them to the dotted line they'll have to take this ship. But bet your life it'll be the last time they ever buy from us."

"It sounds as if it'll be the last time regardless."

"It does."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." He sipped his coffee, staring at the cup grimly. "If we let them out of it, there's a chance I could get another company interested. But that would take time. Cyrus'd have my scalp."

"Why do you keep him in the dark, I mean about the threat of steamships?"

"Nobody keeps him in the dark about anything, least of all what goes on in the business. All the same, we're on the horns of a dilemma, Lavinia."

"There's got to be a way off."

"My sense of honor says, let Baldwin & Baldwin run out on us. And pray their sense of honor, their consciences will change their minds."

"Isn't that wishful thinking?"

"The worst kind. Maybe this morning I should get together with Tom Overstreet and some of the others. Butting skulls, we'll come up with a decision and stick to it. At least that way it can't keep preying on my mind. You know, fish or cut bait."

"You'll do the right thing, I'm sure."

"I wish I could do the right thing about Lisa. I've been thinking, I don't know but what she'd be better off in the hospital after all."

"What made Craven change his mind about putting her in, I wonder?"

"Do doctors ever need reasons for what they do or don't? I get the feeling his self-consciousness over the situation is finally getting to him. Putting her in the hospital would be like putting his failure on exhibition."

"Amazing. The very same thought crossed my mind."

"Really?"

"Honestly. I just wonder what happened to all the arguments he gave us earlier, about being able to watch over her better, her pulse and temperature and all that. It just seems that whatever's best for her ought to be the deciding factor, not the risk to his image. I don't

know what he's worried about. None of his friends seems to be doing any better with her than he."

He nodded. "I'll ask him to drop by work today so we can talk about it. The way she lies there day after day . . . even if what she's got doesn't kill her, she could stay like this long enough to waste away to nothing. Don't you think?"

"Talk to him about that."

"How long can she go without food?"

"I don't know, Ross. The thing that scares me is that nothing's been done, not a blessed thing. It's as if she's out of human hands, as if God doesn't want any of us to interfere."

The clock sounded in the living room. "Eight o'clock," he said. "I'd better get a move on."

"Finish your coffee."

He gulped it down, and, with a slice of toast between his teeth, put on his coat.

She straightened it for him. "I hope that business with Baldwin & Baldwin works out for the best," she said.

"Yes, for grandfather's sake."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Don't work too hard, and do get in touch with Dr. Craven."

"I will."

### III

"Come in," said Ross in response to her knock.

Loosening the front of her wrap a bit, she turned the knob and went inside. He was sitting up in bed reading the newspaper, but when he raised his eyes from it to capture hers she saw at once the hoped-for look of hunger in them. So like his father's eyes they were, so unable to conceal the workings of his mind. Approaching the bed, she set the glass on the nightstand and sat down beside him.

"You smell delicious," he said quietly.

"Thank you. Ross?"

"Yes?"

"Tell me again what Dr. Craven said."

Folding the newspaper he tossed it to one side and started sipping the sherry. "He's decided he wants to move Lisa to Roger Williams."

"He keeps changing his mind like a schoolgirl."

"Vinnie, he didn't come right out and say he didn't want to move her. He said not right now. There's a reason for the delay. He's having a private room remodeled for her, installing all sorts of equipment, to measure heartbeat, breathing, everything. He claims it'll be ready in two or three days."

"That's encouraging."

"He's trying, I'll say that for him. And he hasn't tried to pull the wool over my eyes." He paused and smiled. "You look lovely, more beautiful every day."

Affecting embarrassment, she looked appropriately demure. "Drink."

He set the half-emptied glass on the table. "Not tonight."

Silence. Her mind whirled as a soft, enjoyable

tingling sensation started between her thighs. She found her upper lip with the tip of her tongue, turning her eyes from him.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Look away like that. Give me your hand."

"Ross—"

"Please."

She did so, feigning reluctance, smiling timidly. His hand was surprisingly warm enveloping her own, tightening, pulling her closer to him. Suddenly their faces were inches apart. Her breasts under the silken tautness touched his chest sending a tremor through her upper body. Her throat was dry, her eyes smouldering, suffused with craving for him. His hand moved hers to the edge of the counterpane, curling her fingers around it, and pushing her wrist away from him. Slowly she drew back the covers. He was completely naked, his legs spread slightly apart, his testicles huge, his member erect, pulsing visibly, throbbing. Her hands crept to it as her breath began coming in measured hollow tones. She stroked it, feeling its steellike firmness, the throbbing steady beneath her fingers as she drew them upward to the head and down again. Again. Again. Then letting one hand go, she brought it down to caress his testicles.

"Ross, Ross—"

His fingers slipped beneath her neckline, fondling her breasts gently, his palms wandering over the nipples. She stood up, releasing him, throwing her head back, letting her lovely hair cascade down her back. Her loins were on fire, her breasts rising and falling betraying the passion suddenly boiling up within. Her hands groped for the knot of her sash, untying it, letting the ends fall, the garment swing open.

"Ross—Ross—"

Easing it off her gleaming white shoulders, letting it crumple to the floor, she lay down beside him, their

bodies touching full length, his member hard against her stomach, pulsing rhythmically. His mouth came to hers, his kiss sending a visible tremor coursing through her body. She closed her eyes slipping downward into pink and purple clouds, swallowed up by them, dissolving into a limp mass, without will, without strength, captive to an all-consuming urge to feel him inside her, his throbbing manhood driving her into a paroxysm of enravishment, quenching the raging thirst of her desire.

## IV

She had taken lodging overnight at the Three Nuns Inn in Leicester, resting, but unable to sleep in the room given her, the only room available, according to the innkeeper. The reason for its availability became clear at once. It was crawling with roaches as big as her thumb, the disgusting things scuttling about the floor in broad daylight, having, she surmised, escaped the pestilential pit of a kitchen located directly below. The room hadn't been cleaned in a month, the bedclothing dirty and nauseating with body odor. If she'd been anything less than completely exhausted, she would have stretched out on the floor and taken her chances with the six-legged nonpaying occupants, but she had little liking for crawling things and none whatsoever when they came calling under cover of darkness.

In spite of Dr. Golightly's adjuration to leave Mansfield as soon as possible, she had stayed for Meggo's funeral, held that afternoon, conducted by a priest from St. Mary's Church in nearby Arnold, he being a friend of Timothy Radwell's and willingly offering his services.

Meggo had gone to her reward by way of a brief and simple ceremony. Under the eyes of Dr. Golightly, the four Radwells, and her own, the coffin had been let down into the grave, the hard brown earth shoveled back in and a crude wooden grave marker fashioned by Radwell set at the head. Lisa had placed a small bunch of cowslips upon the mound, murmured a short prayer, and said her final farewell to poor Meggo, poor, poor Meggo.

Jammed between an overweight middle-aged gentleman and his similarly-endowed mother, she and her spine bounced over the rugged, rocky road to Leicester.

Her thoughts were on the future, what lay ahead of her in London, plague-ridden as it was—at least, according to Golightly, fast becoming so. Plague or not, this was the turning point, the first step forward to return. Recalling what Klovka had told her, she thought about Lavinia. In the relatively brief time she herself had been in Providence, barely a few days actually, apart from Tom Overstreet, Nurse Hedridge, Cyrus, and the servants, and excepting the guests at the dinner party, none of whom knew her from Adam, Lavinia was the only person she had been close to. A witch? Unbelievable! Absurd! How could Ross's own mother's sister be a witch, without Justine, without any of them being aware of it? How could she possibly keep such a thing a secret from his father?

No, that part of it was entirely possible. She had once read a romance by Matthew Lewis—*Ambrosio: or the Monk*. One statement in that book stood out in memory: "The devil's best trick is to persuade us that he doesn't exist." Witches, too, took special and generally ingenious pains to conceal their calling.

If Lavinia were responsible, if it was within her power, the next question was why? What could possibly motivate her to do such a thing? She had lost Gray and everything marriage to him would bring her. But how could eliminating his son's wife rectify that? Easily, now that she thought about it, by freeing Ross. Essentially, Ross was Gray, resident ruler of the Dandridge world. Married, he was beyond Lavinia's reach; even worse was the possibility of his becoming a father. A complication difficult, if not impossible to contend with. But childless, better yet unmarried, he had to be fair game.

A sudden chill caused her to shudder. How in the world had Lavinia done this to her? Murdered her and sent her spirit, her soul, her inner self back in time to take possession of a dying, now dead Janet Stiles? If so, what had Lavinia done with *her* body? Buried her? God in heaven, no! She started, her hand flying to her



mouth, her heart turning over inside her. Ross would never permit such a thing. Still, if she were dead, if they could find no life in her, what choice would he have? He'd summon a doctor, of course. And what would he do? What could he do if he examined her and failed to detect any sign of life?

"My dear, are you ill?" asked a sweet-looking elderly woman, balancing an enormous hatbox on her lap.

"I'm all right, thank you."

"You're white as a sheet."

"Nausea!" exclaimed the man sitting beside the woman. "It's stuffy as hell in this damned box!"

His manner may have been abrupt, but his observation was squarely on the mark. The roof of the coach had been piled with trunks and smaller baggage, crates and boxes and most of the interior, except for the space taken up by the six passengers, crammed with smaller pieces, leaving barely room for air.

But they had made it to Leicester without accident or perilous incident involving highwaymen, Lisa to the Three Nuns and the company of the cockroaches which had kept her awake and listening from nightfall 'til dawn. The next morning she had purchased space on the first coach to Bedford, spending the following night in a room that was positively palatial in comparison to the one in Leicester, and the second morning had departed for London with a whole new set of traveling companions, but fully as much luggage and as little breathing space.

The road improved with every mile under the wheels, although becoming thickly layered with dust, traceable to the fact that, according to one of her fellow passengers, the part of the country through which they were traveling had been spared any rain for the past six weeks. Within minutes after leaving Bedford they had arrived at the ancient Roman station at the fording point of the river Ouse, setting forth across the rickety bridge which swayed and groaned, threatening to give

way under the heavy load, suffusing the faces of those inside with fear and near consternation and prompting one to question why the driver hadn't considered ordering them all out to walk across.

But they reached the other side without mishap, picking up the Great North Road leading directly to London. Cart tracks and narrow lanes crawled away into the dark woodlands on either side and soon traffic coming out of the city began increasing, coaches, pony and handcarts, horsemen and straggling hikers weighed down with all their worldly goods parading by on either side.

On two occasions, the coach drew to the side of the road to discharge passengers, at Hatfield and outside Littleheath. The sudden appearance of breathing room was welcomed with pleasure by Lisa, but her mood was quickly altered when the driver drew up a third time at a fork in the road east of Hadley and getting down from his seat, opened the door and quietly announced that it was as far as he was going.

Three of the passengers had gotten out, leaving her and two young men, one pimply-faced, seedily-dressed, and blessed with the annoying habit of sniffing loudly every thirty seconds; the other better-dressed and better-looking, with curly black hair and a pleasant smile and showing a semblance of breeding.

"What are you talking about, man?" asked Pimple-Face irritably. "We paid you through to London!"

The driver reached into his pocket. "I'll give you half-fare back, which is cheating myself. I'm not driving in and that's that."

"I do believe he's afraid of the bloody distemper," said Curly Hair. He snickered. "Got your nerves twitching, has it?"

"Say what you please, Mr. Mouth, I ain't beggin' me no contagion, I ain't. I be a family man. If you've a mind to stay on, I'm heading that way, to Claybril, then on up to Theobald's Park." He pointed at the sun.

Pimply-Face dismissed this suggestion with a wave. "What in hell would we want with Theobald's Park? Give us our money."

He reimbursed all three of them. "Where are you heading for in London, miss?" he asked placing the money in her hand.

"Westminster, near Charing Cross."

"I shouldn't if I were you. You'll find yoursel' right in the thick of it. All these people be gettin' out fast as legs 'n wheels can carry 'em. You'd best change your mind."

"I appreciate your concern, but I really must go on."

"You'll have to hoof it, 'less you find a carter headin' in."

"I don't mind walking."

"It's better than thirteen mile from here. A long hike for a lady."

"We'll keep her company," said Pimply-Face, tipping his hat. "Won't we, Charley?"

"Why don't you shut your bone box?" snapped the other.

So she would have to walk thirteen miles. It could be worse, she mused, it could be fourteen. She could be thankful she'd only have to carry Janet's reticule and Meggo's small bag. Standing at the fork in the road, she watched the coach lurch away, heading eastward toward Claybril, a cloud of smoke billowing upward from the rear wheels. Then she started down the road toward the distant line of earthworks bordering the northern part of the city. The two young men lingered at the signpost dividing the fork, apparently debating whether or not to begin walking, or wait for the first transportation to come along. They'd have a long wait, she told herself. Everything on wheels south of Bedford, save their own coach, had been heading north.

It was a clear day, but broiling hot. She walked for about two miles until her legs began to tire. The air was redolent of the sweet scent of pine, the breeze slipping

through a dense stand of towering green trees just beyond the ditch to the right. The sudden end to the mistreatment of her spine by the jouncing coach had been welcome, but walking was tiring, so she deserted the road for the trees, finding a heap of brown needles, setting her bags down and sitting down to rest. Mrs. Radwell had given her five hard-boiled eggs and salt. Three remained, and, taking one out and divesting it of its shell, she salted it and began eating. A small brown rabbit hopped by, dodging behind the trees, pausing to eye her disapprovingly and vanishing and overhead, a meadow pipit sent its melodic song weaving through the air.

Finishing the egg, she felt drowsy, yawning and lying back on the bed of needles. Closing her eyes, she slept. She had no idea how long, but suddenly she felt something moving against her ankle. Instantly, she was awake, sitting up, supporting herself with one hand, rubbing her eyes with the back of the other.

Panic seized her. Pimply-Face was standing astride her, his foot against her ankle, smirking down at her. Charley was kneeling by her shoulder, his hands suddenly shooting forward, seizing her wrists. Pimply-Face began unlacing his breeches, exposing himself, going down on his knees, his ugly face contorted in a leer.

"I got first 'cause the coin came up tails," he said. "Tails for tail, get it? Just lie back and relax, you're going to enjoy it."

With a sudden wrenching movement, she freed her wrists. But instead of rising to run away she threw her head back and began laughing loudly. His smile faded; he looked confused.

"That'll be tuppence each, dears," she said brightly. "Payable in advance. And the fire's for free."

"What you talkin' about, fire?" asked Charley, coming around into view and gaping at her.

Grasping the hem of her skirt, she pulled it up revealing herself. "This fire! The burning, the syphilis, love!"

Their jaws dropped and they took a step backward. "Let's go," said Pimple-Face.

"Don't go, come close and see!" Continuing to hold her skirt up, she pushed herself forward. Charley mumbled something and both turned and walked away. Catching herself to keep from roaring with laughter, she lowered her skirt.

"Where you going? Hey, come back."

They walked faster, heading for the road, starting down it toward the city.

She ate another egg to give them time to get well ahead, though at the rate they were moving she'd have needed a horse to catch up with them. Then she resumed walking.

By late afternoon, moving at a leisurely but steady pace, she came within sight of St. Pancras and the Fleet Ditch. The stink of the city, the dung, the offal, the incredible filth meeting the eye everywhere one looked and even worse the faces of the people, moneyed and poor, young and old stamped with sorrow, filled her with despair. She was aware that she was deliberately exposing herself to the horror of a highly contagious disease, for which, in these times, there was no cure.

*Malign conjunction of the stars.*

Doors were painted with ominous-looking red crosses, windows closed and tightly locked against the intruder. The daily business of London, raking the streets and sweeping them, the labor of shopkeepers and tradesmen, street hawkers and washerwomen, even children at play, seemed to be slowed to a snail's pace, as if under the threat of illness and death, enthusiasm for life had been so depleted as to turn the entire city into a great slow-motion dumb-show.

Reaching Charing Cross and asking directions to Tilt Yard, she was sent through a narrow passage to a churchyard by a row of almshouses. A funeral was in progress, and she gave it a wide berth. She emerged from the yard by the church door, across from a dwarf-

wall with a palisado on it, the city wall at right angles to it. Coming out by a disreputable-looking brick building, she was startled by sight of a horsecart moving slowly up the cobbled street, carrying a heaping load of corpses. Turning from the grisly sight, she covered her nose against the smell and pressed on toward Tilt Yard. She soon came upon a confusing web of alleys spreading like tendrils in every direction, all of them as narrow as the passage to the churchyard. A young woman with a hard, well-pummeled face leaned out a window, looked up and down and straight through her, produced a bucket of slops and dumped it directly in her path. Shaking the last few drops onto the stones, she smiled at Lisa, drew back from the window and slammed it shut.

She stepped over the slops as best she could and, guessing her way, headed down Blue Alley, coming out at the end of a large open space. In the center was a hole into which a number of bodies had been dumped. Water from an underground spring had filled the hole to within a few inches of the top. From the condition of the corpses they had been immersed for some time. The stench was dreadful, causing her to retch. She ran by the hole to the other end of the yard, there discovering a small arrow sign pointing to Tilt Yard beyond. Locating it in short order, she spotted the herbarium sign. It was just as Klovka had described it, suspended from an iron bar above the closed door:

Tilt Yard Herbarium

N. Fears

## V

An hour had passed, a barely estimable fraction of her lifetime but embracing an interlude, an experience so beautiful, so abundantly joyful and satisfying there could never be another like it. He had been all she imagined he would be, the first man she had ever known who could make her feel like a woman. What Ledion was—but warm, enveloping her in his warmth as Ledion never had. Lying in bed alone in her room, she went back to the glass of half-consumed sherry in her thoughts, beginning with it, taking the time step by step along its glorious way, reexperiencing in retrospect each phase in its turn. Everything she had waited for, all that denied her, snatched from her grasp by Gray's death was now back, and with Ross to share all the lovely moments for all the nights to come.

He had adored her, reveling in her body, in her movements, unable to control his passion. She laughed, startling Mody, sending him leaping from the windowsill and racing under the bed to hide. A man half her age, in the prime of youth, and in one hour she had worn him down to the brink of exhaustion.

It was fantastic, too beautifully barbarous to be believed. Her own flesh and blood, her own fetus born and grown to manhood and fallen in love with her!

She pictured Lisa lying in her bed as motionless as death. Perhaps it was time to rid themselves of her permanently. Free Ross and begin bringing him to her of his own free will, without the help of any potion. A needle driven into Lisa's ear, pushed well into her mindless brain. There would be a drop or two of blood, but that could be carefully wiped away. Given a few hours, Craven would discover her dead, assume that her

heart had given out, sign the death certificate and offer his condolences to Ross and Cyrus and Aunt Lavinia.

Killing her would be child's play; the question was how would her death affect Ross? Two hours ago it would have hit him like an axe; now, with less of an impact, probably, and nothing close to his reaction when he'd found her in her coma earlier. However hard he took it, he wouldn't brood for long. He had enjoyed his dear mother. Enjoyed wasn't the word, delighted in her like an overanxious bridegroom! It was so obvious as to be downright blatant. And yet why shouldn't he, for the first time in his life he'd had a grown woman. What could his child-bride possibly give him that she couldn't improve upon? Not a blessed thing!

Kill her, remove her from the scene. Ledion wouldn't approve, of course. His trouble was an overendowment of patience for the problems of impatient people. When one had no time, dear Ledion had all the time in the world. Killing Lisa would solve another dilemma, the one in Westerly. Eliminating her would lock Dr. John Settle out of her life permanently. And the last she'd seen of him would be the last she'd ever see. No need to explain what she'd done to him or Ledion; what neither knew could never hurt her.

She fell asleep bathed in a roseate glow of mingled contentment and power. Unhappily, however, such emotional luxuries can be notoriously short-lived, as she was to discover shortly after arising the next morning.

She was sitting before her mirror brushing her hair when Ross tapped on the door and called to her. She let him in. His hair was in disarray, his eyes rimmed with sleeplessness, his manner uncharacteristically nervous. He began pacing up and down, thumping his fist into his palm, avoiding her eyes. She tried to take hold of his arm, but he spun away and continued pacing.

"My dear, what on earth is the matter?"

"I don't know where to start."



"What are you talking about?"

"Vinnie, I'm sorry about last night. Sorry isn't the word. Drowning in remorse is more like it, choking to death with it! I don't know what came over me. I guess it's being alone the way I've been, and you looking so Goddamned desirable. I couldn't help myself!"

She stopped him, holding him firmly with both hands. "Ross, don't say that, don't even think it. Last night I spent the most beautiful hour of my life in your arms. It was heaven, my darling. You can't say you're sorry for that, I won't let you. You can't bring regret to what we did, what we shared." Taking his face in her hands she kissed him warmly. But he pulled free and resumed pacing. "Ross?"

"I'm sorry, Vinnie, I can't look at it like that. I love her. She's lying there helpless as a kitten and I, bastard that I am, turn my back on her and jump into bed with you!"

"You didn't jump. You didn't do anything, nor did I. Two people come together in perfect innocence, people lonely, denied, filled with desire for each other. What can happen did. It's that simple."

"I've never been so Goddamned ashamed of anything in my life! And my life hasn't exactly been the golden standard of deportment, as well you know. I'm a no-good son-of-a-bitch!"

"That's a terrible thing to say, just awful!" It stopped him. He turned staring. "You can't be ashamed of giving me yourself. I can't let you be. You might as well know the truth, I love you."

"Don't say that!"

"Why shouldn't I? Why keep it to myself? I'd like to fling open the windows and shout it to the world. Don't tell me you don't feel something for me."

"Of course I do."

"Then what do you hope to gain by suppressing it, denying it?"

He took hold of her, keeping her at arms' length. "Vinnie, what happened last night was a mistake. It can't happen again, we can't let it."

"May I say something?"

"Well?"

"Something that may upset you terribly, but a fact of life, however morbid it may sound. Ross, could it happen again if, God forbid, she doesn't come out of it?"

"I won't answer that, I don't even want to think about it."

"We don't control it, Ross, neither of us, none of us. We didn't do this to her, we obviously can't undo it. And we can't see what's going to happen, today, tomorrow, next week." She hesitated pulling free and turning her back on him. "I apologize for saying that. You're hurt enough as it is, I shouldn't be adding to it. You can think what you like of me, but I have no regrets about last night. I'm not sorry, I'm not ashamed. I didn't do anything. Neither of us did, beyond giving in to our feelings." She faced him.

Tilting his head to one side, he managed a grim smile. "You're right, I suppose. It just happened, the trap sprung and caught us in the middle. I'd better go. I've got to get ready for breakfast."

"One thing I am sorry about, what I said about Lisa. That was cruel."

"It was honest. You're a very honest person, Vinnie."

"I try to be."

"You don't have to try, it's just the way you are. It's strange, if I had never gone away, never married Lisa."

"Would you and I have fallen in love?" He looked at her, searching her eyes for the answer. She shook her head. "I don't see how we could have."

"You mean Gray? You loved him very much, didn't you?" She nodded and lowered her eyes. "So was it me last night or him?" She recoiled as if he had struck her across the face.

"How could you even think such a thing?"

"I—"

"Last night when you held me, did you think I was pretending to enjoy it? Did you feel that, that I was substituting him for you? Did you?"

"No, not at all."

"I loved him, yes, very very much, but in your arms last night he never entered my mind."

"I believe you."

"It doesn't seem to make much difference whether you do or not. If we never make love again it doesn't." She moved to the window, looking down at the dead garden. "You'd better go, you don't want to be late for work."

He started toward her, stopped, and left the room, closing the door quietly. Picking up a shoe, she drew her arm back and was about to fling it at the mirror when she caught herself, dropped it, and slumped down onto her vanity seat.

Ledion had been right. Was he ever wrong? He had counseled her that patience and patience was what it required. Patience, control of her emotions, luck—Dr. Craven's failure to bring Lisa out of it and his impending capitulation hastened, hopefully, by good fortune. Sooner or later all of them would have to give Lisa over to the ministrations of a higher power, no doubt Justine's favorite minister, Dr. Soames. Then the fun would begin!

A second carefully-measured portion of the black ashes, from the can concealed in her bureau drawer, placed in a cup of his coffee, appeared to be in order. Just the thing to eradicate the torment in his conscience.

She reminded herself that there was no love so strong, so resolute, so stubbornly resistant to change or outside influence as that of a mother for her child.

## VI

The shop was cramped, disastrously cluttered and stuffy, as if the window had been nailed shut eons earlier to permit the interior to develop a blanket of air as stale as a tomb, though decidedly more odoriferous. Lisa had noted upon entering that there was no single outstanding odor, nor even ten. More like a hundred—acid, floral sweet, noxious, pungent, nauseous, aromatic, commingling in one great onslaught of redolence so powerful as to close the nose and bring tears to the eyes. The room itself looked more like a dining room than a shop. Against two walls were floor-to-ceiling shelves crowded with tins and bottles, phials and cruets, boxes and small drawstring sacks, but no counter. A long oval table covered with leaves stood in the middle of the floor, upon it spoons, cups and glasses, jars and cisterns of brass, pewter and lead. Roughly hewn, rickety-looking stools stood about like giant mushrooms. Dominating the whole was a large astrological clock, hanging on the wall at right angles to the stained and soot-flecked window that looked out upon the yard.

The woman's steel-gray eyes were fastened upon the pearl. She held it before them, turning it over on the tips of her fingers, looking, so it seemed, through it. Lisa guessed that she was in her sixties, but she looked younger, her lean, handsome face unlined, her hair as black as night and her posture, even as she sat on her stool, like that of a soldier—back ramrod straight, shoulders back, her movements quick and vigorously executed. Only her voice betrayed her age. It was tinder-dry, almost hollow, and surprisingly weak, breaking now and then, prompting her to pause and clear her throat.

Lowering the pearl, she reached for the green glass wine bottle at her elbow and, pouring a cup half-full, pushed it at Lisa.

"No, thank you."

Elison Beecher shrugged and drained the cup, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. Lisa had introduced herself, handed over the pearl at once and told her entire story, all in the space of fifteen minutes. In that time, Elison Beecher had not said more than a half dozen words, monosyllabic comments, grunting occasionally, nodding, making the face of disapproval, agreement or disdain and more than once letting loose of her concentration, evidently only half listening, going back to the pearl.

"How is Klovka? Still trying to make those silly-looking wooden teeth of hers work?"

"She has no wooden teeth," said Lisa evenly. "The few she does have are real."

"Mmmm." Pushing the empty cup to one side, Elison placed the pearl on the table. "You've come all the way from Mansfield for my help."

"You're the only one who can help me. You know what's happened to me, don't you? She said you would."

"Did she? What else did she tell you about Mother Damnable?"

"That no one can equal your skill in the black arts."

"And what are they?"

"Witchcraft."

"You seem reluctant to say the word."

"I'm not familiar with it. I didn't want you to think I was. It—"

"It scares you."

"I suppose, yes. Will you help me, please? Will you undo this terrible business? What is this they've done to me? How is it possible?"

"Questions, questions. One at a time, child. You were sent back in time by a witch or satanic master. Do you know the meaning of the word reincarnation?"

"To be born again?"

"Not exactly. It is the soul of a dying body moving into another body or form. A new embodiment. What you have been subjected to is quite like reincarnation, only in reverse. Instead of being moved ahead in time you have been sent back. It is called retroincarnation. The person conducting the ceremony of retroincarnation must select a host, in your case this body you awoke to find yourself in."

"Janet Stiles."

"Janet was injured or ill. Whatever the cause, she was dying. She died the split-second you arrived to take possession of her body."

Lisa gasped. "Then she is dead, I was afraid of that."

"As dead as Tut. The timing for the changeover has to be near perfect, obviously. You could hardly enter a week-old corpse. Even a day-old one would cause complications."

"And what about my own body back in Providence? Am I—is it dead?"

"We can find out."

"Do, please."

"Do you have any idea who did this to you, and why?" Lisa explained her suspicions. "She's a witch," said Elison.

"That's what Klovka said, but how can you be sure?"

"Retroincarnation is a craft of witches. No outsider knows such a device even exists, let alone how to use it. She did it, or got somebody who knows how to do it for her. To get you out of the way long enough to carry out whatever she has planned for him."

"Then there's a chance my body is still alive."

"Yes. When one doesn't actually know what's happened, the optimism that is born of desperation always tells us there's a chance. Isn't that so?"

"You don't think there is."

"I told you, we can find out."

"Can you, will you send me back?"

Elison smiled. "We *are* in a rush. Leaping over all the

obstacles to get to the dragon and take him on. I can send you back, yes. Providing we agree on the terms—”

“I have very little money of my own here, but my husband will pay anything you ask. That I’m absolutely certain of.”

“Money? Pounds and pence?” Laughing, she shook her head. “Money is no inducement to me. This shop brings me all I need to keep food on the table, clothes on our backs, and coal on the fire.”

“Then what do you want?”

Elison rose from her stool and began clearing the table, moving cups and glasses to the shelves behind it, clearing space for them. “What did I tell you just a minute ago? No outsider knows that retroincarnation even exists, let alone how to use it. Which means you, child, will have to become a witch. There is no other way.”

“Then I shall.”

“Just like that. Blessed be! You seem to think it’s like joining a club, a sewing circle perhaps? I’m afraid it’s a bit more complicated, and more demanding. Outrageously so in some respects.”

“I’ll do whatever you ask, whatever has to be done. I’ll start right now, right this minute!”

“My my, such eagerness. You’re all ready, are you? Ready for what? Do you know? Can you guess? Of course not. Are you ready to have the blood drained from your body, cleansed, purified and put back, a process so painful as to make childbirth seem like mild soreness in the throat?”

“I can do it!”

“Are you prepared to commit the secrets to memory, all the secrets, hundreds of them, the meaning of the tarots, the numbers, the stars, the consecrated circle, the scourge, cords, pentacle and the athame on the altar? The sword, the censer, the goblet, the salt? The gods and goddesses? Can you copy in darkness in your own hand and learn verbatim the entire Book of Shadows?

You must, because it has never been printed and never will be. You must learn the names and the infernal identities, Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Dana, Arianrod, Bride, and a thousand more. You must master the mysteries, the ceremonies, the secret rites and rituals, the tenets, the drawing of the moon, the sacrifices, the names of the Prince of Darkness—Huitzilopochtli, Fitzliputzli, all his names and all the books—the Grand Grimoire, the Grimoire of Honoring, the Cabalistic symbols and their meanings . . . You must become conversant with all the black arts, from the Age of Stones to now and to your time in 1850 and beyond."

"I can do it, I can do it all."

"With it all, you must be lucky. You become a postulant, you pass all the tests, physical and spiritual and mental, you master all you must know—you still have to be approved and accepted by the coven. Unanimously. I warn you the majority are turned down."

"Why?"

"Because their feet turn in or their eyes are brown or they lisp. The reasons need never be revealed."

"That seems terribly unfair."

"Are you still willing to try?"

"I must, you know I must!"

"Then I shall help you all I can. There is, of course, the matter of reimbursement."

"I'm to become a witch—"

"That's part of it."

"What else?"

Elison poured from the wine bottle and proffered the cup. "Drink, it will relax you." Lisa complied. It tasted slightly bitter, but was warm going down, comforting, almost reassuring. She felt reassured, in spite of the formidable obstacles confronting her. Mother Damnable had not turned her down as she had feared she might. It would be no easy chore, but she would make it. She



couldn't let the thought of not making it cross her mind.

"You will become one of us. You see, I am an optimist."

"And—"

"And so shall your firstborn."

Lisa set the cup down and frowned. "God, no—you can't mean that!"

"God?"

"Why? Isn't it enough I'm prepared to give myself?"

"You mean to give yourself up? Tsk, tsk, you're getting off on the wrong foot, child. Your point of view is all wrong. You're not being asked to make a sacrifice. To become a witch, a loyal subject of His Satanic Majesty is to assume an honorable estate, a mantle difficult to earn and worn with pride!"

"Of course, I'm sorry."

"You may not realize it, but every witch dreams her child will follow in her footsteps. Many don't make it. They're unfit. They don't have the necessary equipment, what we call the positives."

"I understand, but there's my husband. You're asking me to assume that he'll approve."

"Does he love you?"

"Yes."

"Then it's up to you to make him see the necessity for it. I see what you're thinking, child, the wheels turning. You'll agree and get back and resume your life together, in time give birth to a child, and change your mind, renege. Impossible. Even to attempt such duplicity would bring the master's wrath down upon you and him and the baby like an avalanche. We are bound by the most solemn oaths, agreements from which there can be no release, no allowance made for a change of heart."

"But why my child? Why such a high price for something within your power to do? You're making no sacrifice. I'm the one going through it all."

"You're ignoring one thing. What you're asking me to do is undo that which one of my sisters has effected."

"She did it maliciously, out of jealousy, without any cause. I never wronged her, never harmed her in any way."

"Nevertheless, she is a witch and you, an outsider, are asking me to interfere in something that she has every right to initiate and enforce. I said before witchcraft is not a club. In the entire population of England we are probably fewer than five hundred in number; in the whole world no more than ten thousand. Almost since the beginning of time the majority has viewed us in a sinister light. At best with skepticism and disapproval, at worst with condemnation, ostracism, torture, and death in its cruelest forms. The Albigenians, the Bogomils, the Tisserads, dozens of sects have been destroyed by fanatical nonbelievers. There is never, there never has been 'let well enough alone' in respect to witchcraft. It is always abuse, bullying, persecution, driving us into hiding to protect ourselves. Hysteria and murder have walked with us hand in hand since the beginning of tribal life. 'Hang them and burn their bodies' is the war cry. The mere suggestion of acquaintanceship with a witch is enough to send one to the stake." She held up one hand, spreading her fingers, then closing them with the other. "In this world we are a handful of gifted, dedicated people joined together for mutual protection and safety. We have become as tightly knit as the most secret of secret societies in and out of Christendom. Witches do not wrong other witches. We are united against the common aggressor and we shall remain so forever. We never look for enemies among our ranks, we look outside. And there they are, hundreds of thousands of them, millions, the grand army of hysterics led by their generals in the pulpits screaming their vile warnings against us, goading the sheep to destroy us.

"What you're asking of me is without precedent. To turn my powers against the powers of my sister.

Extraordinary, inconceivable under any other circumstances. But this pearl, your story, your innocence, your willingness to become one of us, your generosity in giving over your firstborn are all factors that make it possible. I will give you until sundown tomorrow to think it over. If you agree we will move forward. Refuse and you will leave this shop never to return."

## VII

Talk of Lisa's decision ended at that. Elison turned the conversation to Simon Stiles, about whom she expressed concern.

"I wouldn't want him skulking about the yard," she explained. "He's trouble, trouble brings the constables, and they can be a terrible annoyance. Last year they took this place apart looking for a missing purse. I'm no thief, they couldn't find a thing, but they went away leaving us upside down and inside out."

"I can't believe Simon would show up in London. The whole game has changed for him now. He's on the run for murder. His own skin has to come before his precious vengeance."

"You're a bold sort, I must say, coming to this city with the plague spread about us like Christmas snow."

Lisa pointed at the shelf behind Elison. "All those herbs and medicines, what do you prescribe for plague?"

"There's nothing, no foolproof cure. How can you cure when you don't know the cause?"

She was tempted to offer the same argument she'd given Izaak Golightly, putting rats and fleas against malign conjunctions of the stars, but there was nothing to be gained by running the risk of offending one whose help and friendship she so desperately needed.

"Of course," continued Elison, as if on second thought she'd decided that her professional reputation was up for scrutiny, "there are sovereign remedies for all ills."

"Do any of them work?"

"Oh, yes." Getting up she selected a small purple bottle, removed the top and held it for Lisa to smell.

She did and made a face. "I sell it to no less a personage than his grace, the Bishop of Worcester, *a* bishop, that is. He calls it his Curing Powder, and passes it off as his own concoction, the sly little toad."

"You sell cures to churchmen? You traffic with the enemy?"

"Business is business."

"What's in it?"

"It's rather exotic. Black tips of crab claws, the crabs caught when the sun enters Cancer, musk, civet, ambergris and magister of pearl. Also the dried skins of an adder and two or three slow worms reduced to jelly in spring water."

"Sounds expensive."

"This bottle costs one pound. I can't batch enough of it for him."

Lisa walked along the shelves reading labels aloud: "Mithridate, bezoar stone. What's that?"

"A stony mass found in the stomachs of goats. Excellent for melancholy affections."

"Salt of steel galbanum, castor, asafetida, amber, camphor. Alexipharmicle bolus."

"Dr. Hayes's favorite. Chief lecturer at the College of Physicians."

"You mean to tell me doctors buy from you?"

"What they can't get from their chemist friends. Doctors will try anything. The game is to please the patient, and you please him by impressing him. Run-of-the-mill remedies may work, but they have little value in conversation. People in general are quite mad, you know. My stock is much more exotic than any chemist's. Alexipharmicle bolus is considered a mighty recruiter of spirits—clove, gillyflower syrup, Virginia snakeweed root, and just a dash of Gascoigne's powder."

A sudden thumping over their heads stopped the conversation abruptly.

"What on earth is that?" asked Lisa.

"Come."

Up the narrow stairway in the rear, they climbed. The overpowering stench of excrement struck her nostrils, stopping her on the top step. The room had no door, not even a curtain. It appeared smaller than the shop area downstairs, but with windows on three sides instead of the front only. A narrow wooden bed filled one corner, opposite a washstand with a cracked bowl. Beside that was an oval mirror enclosed in a frame of dark wood, the glass badly in need of polishing.

Sitting in a rocking chair with her back to the mirror was the oldest living human Lisa had ever seen. Like a crabapple drained of its juices, dried and wrinkled, squeezing into itself, she sat humming tunelessly and rocking, her tiny black eyes imbedded in fat folds of puffy flesh piercing between the lids, darting about; the slender lips, deeply lined, contracting her mouth to the size of a buttonhole, her small, round body concealed from neck to ankles in a fire-red cape. One hand was wrapped about the head of a stick, jumping up and down like a piston, thumping the floor with it.

"Why didn't you call me before? I keep telling you," said Elison in an overly patient voice. "You always wait too long."

"Bitch!" snarled the woman. The little eyes blinked, found Lisa and drilled her through. "Who are you?"

"She's one of us."

"Bitch!"

Elison turned to Lisa. "Go on downstairs. I'll be down in a bit."

Lisa retreated, thankful to be able to withdraw from the revolting stench, retreating to the shop and opening the door to bring in a breath of air. The sun was setting over the houses in the west in the direction of Ebury Farm. The air was heavy with the heat of the day, draping the city in a motionless blanket of contagion, she fancied, touching everyone, infecting them by the hundreds, starting the day's quota down the short inescapable passage ending in death and a grave shared

with friends and neighbors, a hole with water seeping upward, floating their remains like dead fish, white bellies up in the Thames.

She took a deep breath and considered her plight, the good and the bad of it. Despite finding Elison Beecher, despite all the progress made since meeting Klovka for the first time, the scales still appeared well out of balance in favor of black failure. To give up her firstborn child, Ross's joy to come, even hinting at such a thing, could destroy their relationship. How in heaven's name could she make him understand such a heartless demand? Still, her return, his discovery of Lavinia's involvement, the unraveling of the whole sordid business, everything explained, everything clear at last—he'd have to accept the fact that nothing would have been resolved without sacrifice, without concessions.

What if she had no children? They might adopt. Elison had said very specifically "firstborn," not first child. A definite distinction there, or was she merely conjuring one up for the sake of inspiring something akin to optimism?

She loved him so she ached for him, as if invisible hands were squeezing her heart in her body. To deprive him, to hurt him so, would be cruel as well as unjust. Knowing him as she did, were he in her position he would have found an alternative, though she could see none. Dear dependable Ross. If obliged to choose a single constant throughout the whole nightmare it would be her conviction, absolute and unwavering, that she could depend upon him. His love, his loyalty. Nothing Lavinia could do or say could alter his feelings for her. Nor could anything else, except his Lisa's death.

That was another thing. Time was suddenly a vital ingredient. The quicker something was done, the better her chances of returning to find her body still intact, prepared to receive her.

"Forgive the interruption." It was Elison behind her.

"Close the door, please, there's a draft. She has no control, she pays no attention."

"She seems very bright and quick."

"She's amazing. Can you guess how old she is."

"Ninety, ninety-five, even older," said Lisa.

"She was born in 1535."

"You're not serious!"

Elison nodded. "In Bristol. At the age of twelve she saw Henry VIII buried in St. George's Chapel in Windsor. She was twenty-three when Elizabeth was crowned. She remembers every detail of the battle of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Her memory is incredible."

"Is she a witch?"

"A teacher of witches. She sees the future more clearly, more accurately than most people can see the past. Everything I know she taught me."

"A hundred and thirty years old . . ."

"Her name, Lucilla Agnes Susannah Crockett, is inscribed in the registry of St. Peter's Church in Bristol, date January the fourth, 1535. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"She's your grandmother?"

"Great-grandmother, my only living relative. She's in one of her foul moods now, otherwise I'd take you up so you might talk with her. Perhaps tomorrow morning. Where will you stay tonight?"

"I hadn't given it much thought."

"Stay here. We can fix up something, make you comfortable, give you a bite to eat. Are you hungry?"

"I brought along some eggs. There's one left. We can share it. And one other thing—"

"You agree to the terms."

"Yes."

She put a hand on her shoulder. "That's only a word. What does your heart say?"

"I've said it, I'll go through with it."

"You must take a blood oath, and there'll be a paper for you to sign."



"Whatever you say."

"You'll never regret it, Lisa, I promise you. There's one way to look at it, child, you're young and healthy. You'll be just as young and healthy when you get back. You should have many children. You'll never miss your firstborn."

"Have you ever been a mother, Elison?"

"Certainly, why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

## VIII

The attendants arrived, and under Dr. Craven's direction and Ross's, Cyrus's, and Lavinia's worried eyes, removed Lisa to an ambulance to be taken to the hospital. Ross went along. Lavinia and Cyrus stood at the living-room window watching the vehicle move slowly down the road, disappearing into the trees.

"What do you think?" muttered Cyrus. "Think it'll help?"

"Praise God, we can only hope so."

"I suppose Alex knows what he's doing, though Lord knows he or nobody else isn't doing very much. Strange business." He searched her eyes. "What do you think's wrong with her?"

"It's a mystery to me, although I still think that tea she drank could have caused it. What's so frightening is it was all so sudden. One minute she's sitting yawning, talking about going up to bed, getting up from her chair, all perfectly normal; the next thing you know she's—" She gestured helplessly, turning from him. She wished he wouldn't stare at her so. Lately, every time their eyes met it was as if he was prying into her brain, avoiding any personal questions, to be sure, but with his eyes so steeped with curiosity he was beginning to get on her nerves.

Pretending a sudden decision to go to the hospital, she excused herself, dressed and left the house, taking a gig from the stable and heading down the road.

An hour later the sun had all but vanished behind the distant hills, the gloaming stealing through the trees and embracing the house when Ross returned, handing Thursby his jacket and joining Cyrus in the study.

"How did it go?" asked Cyrus.

"No problems. That's some set-up he's got in that room. Complete privacy, all sorts of devices and equipment pulled up around the bed. He explained them all to me, but half the time I hardly knew what he was talking about."

"You look tired."

"I am." He sprawled in a chair, kicking off his boots. Cyrus moved to the bell cord, pulling it.

"What you need is a drink."

Thursby appeared. Cyrus ordered two bourbons. They were brought in almost immediately, as if they'd been sitting on the tray on the floor outside the room.

"Close the doors," said Cyrus.

"Yes, sir."

He fastened them after Thursby was gone, then saluted Ross with his glass. "Did you bump into Lavinia at the hospital?"

"No, why, did she decide to follow us over?"

"That's what she said."

Ross sipped and surveyed his grandfather. "You still can't get around to feeling very strongly toward her, can you?"

"What do you say that for?"

"You just plain don't like the cut of her jib."

Draining his glass, Cyrus wiped the bottom of it on the palm of his hand and set it on the window seat. "That's absurd."

"You're not very fair. You hold it against her for looking like Mother, for being here in her place, something she's no more at fault for than the man in the moon."

"If you have to know, I don't trust her."

"You're kidding!"

"The hell I am. There's something about her."

"What? Spell it out, let's hear."

"She may be your mother's twin sister, but they're as different as any two people ever born. She's bad medicine, she is. And I bet she knows one hell of a lot more

about this that's happened to Lisa than she's letting on!"

"You're crazy."

"Am I?"

"You think she's responsible, that she caused it?"

"Exactly." Ross laughed. "There's nothing funny about it. It's tragic, that's what it is!"

"Cyrus, you take everybody Lisa's met since we got here, far and away the best friend. Hell, the only friend she's made is Lavinia. From the moment she first laid eyes on her, she's fallen all over her. She worships Lisa."

"And why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I'm saying, why should she worship her? I'm not saying she shouldn't be hospitable toward her, but she's fallen down at her feet and hasn't gotten up. She fawned over her like a mother over a newborn baby, agreed with every word out of her mouth, waited on her hand and foot. And I'm talking about before Lisa took sick, not to mention how she sticks to her like glue now."

"She's obviously very fond of her."

"Horse manure! Nobody's naturally that fond of anybody, nobody without an axe to grind. No sir, there's something unnatural about it. Christ Almighty, boy, bringing that little girl into this house pushes Lavinia clear off the gameboard. She's out of things completely. Are you telling me she's going to fall in love with Lisa for doing that to her?"

"Lisa didn't do anything."

"You know what I'm saying. You know something, I may be old and creaky and achy, a little dim in the eye, not hearing so good as I used to, slowed down a mite, but getting old isn't all wearing down. I'm beginning to find out it has certain compensations. I may not have all my wits about me all the time, but when I do have 'em, they're sharper'n hell. I see things, I sense things you don't know are going on right under your nose. You

can't live as long as I have and not improve on a few faculties. Hell, just piling on the years does that much for you, let alone the amount and kind of experience you sponge up. I say I don't trust her and you keep telling me it's because of your mother, because I loved that woman like she was my own child and that that's unfair to Lavinia. All right, I suppose it's true I am a grouch and plain speaking and cold with no talent for hiding my inside feelings, but I'm not accusing her without cause—I mean honest reasons!

"She left this house an hour ago saying she was going to the hospital. She never got there. What's that but an out-and-out lie?"

"You're jumping to conclusions. I could have missed her easily. She's probably there right now."

"Maybe, maybe not. There's more to it. All that prowling through the woods after dark she did after Gray was killed, and some time back her leaving here in the dead o' night, riding off to town, For what? Demanded Enos give her a horse, forced him to give her the key. Refused to tell him where she was going or why!"

"She's not a child. Nobody's told her she can't come and go when and where she pleases. Nobody would. She doesn't have to account to you or me or Enos."

"Another thing, you don't see how she looks at you. But I have. She gives you the same lustful look she used to give your father, eating him up with her eyes. I've seen her look at you that way a dozen times!"

"I don't believe this."

"Only 'cause you don't want to. It's fact, pure as snow!"

"It's fancy, your prejudices against her surfacing like silt in a pond. It's all your point of view, Cyrus, twisted, hazed over with suspicion. She's as innocent of any wrongdoing with Lisa as you or I. Deep down in your heart you know it."

"You're blind as a bat, and stupid!"

"Maybe, but until you can come up with something a little more substantial in the way of incriminating evidence I suggest we drop it."

"If it's evidence you want, Goddamn it, I'll get it for you!"

"Which doesn't mean you start badgering her."

"I never would and your even suggesting it tells me how high your opinion of me is!"

"I didn't say it to insult you. Let's change the subject, shall we?"

"Good idea. Come on upstairs, I got something to show you. But first, let's have us one more drink."

Cyrus closed the door behind them. "You haven't said two words about that Baldwin & Baldwin problem in days. Willis Baldwin must have come to some sort of decision by this time. What are you holding back from me for?"

"They've agreed to honor the contract."

Cyrus beamed and clapping his hands rubbed them briskly. "For Christ's sakes, why didn't you tell me?" He stopped short, staring. "What's the catch?"

"The insurance. They want us to underwrite it."

"The hell you say!"

"Now, take it easy."

"You're not going to go along."

"It's either that or lose out completely."

"I've never heard such nonsense! They buy a ship from us and we're supposed to pay for the insurance on it?"

"They claim their clipper damage is three times any other type vessel in their fleet. I have to believe it."

"So do I, but that's part of the game. We can't control wind and weather. They want clipper speed, they have to take their chances just like everybody else!"

"Fewer and fewer companies seem to be willing to. Willis says they can't afford to, not anymore."

"Jesus Christ!" He seethed and fumed and paced and

slammed his fist against the drafting board. "God-damned thieves! To hell with it, give 'em what they want! Give 'em the moon!"

"Thanks a lot. I'm a damned fool for giving in, that's what you think, don't you! Say it!"

"I didn't say anything of the sort!"

"No need to, it's written all over your face!"

"I didn't ask you up here to fight, dammit! There's something I want you to look at. Something that may change everything for the company, maybe make life one hell of a lot easier. For certain it should keep us out of deals like that one! Come look at these drawings." Sketched out roughly on the board were three views of the same vessel, a three-masted ship showing the widest spars Ross had ever seen. "She's a schooner, modified construction obviously. I've been fiddling with her for three weeks. I think she's the answer to our problems."

"Those masts look pretty stubby."

"Eighty, ninety feet, tops. No more hundred and fifty. The damned topmasts on our clippers are nothing more than expensive, hand-varnished kindling wood. Leastwise that's what they end up as."

"Where do you get speed out of this?"

"Look at the width o' those sails, and though you can't see it here there's a steam engine aft."

"I don't believe my ears!"

"Not a big one, not one o' those stinking coal-gulpers that costs a mint to move a mile, a small one with an auxiliary right about there. Small, but powerful enough to handle the canvas. Hear me out, Ross, as I see it shorter masts mean less chance of accident in a heavy blow, wider yardarms keep your power down closer to the water, out of the heavy high winds. That auxiliary engine'll get sails up and down in half the time it takes men by hand. No more lost topmasts, sails, no more sprung spars, no more fishing stuff out o' the water."

"No more speed."

"So what is speed, boy? We've been harping on it for thirty years, pouring it into everybody's ear, insisting that for all the high-wind risk of the clipper design, all the cost of repairs, all the delay, all the junked schedules, the out-and-out gamble—and that's what it amounts to—the speed makes it worthwhile. But I've been looking at it from every possible angle, checking all our figures back to when we started and I've come up with something that makes speed obsolete. Oh, maybe not that, but at least tosses a rein over it so you can get it under control." His hand went to the board, turning over a piece of yellow paper. One word was inscribed on it: *rate*. "Twenty knots is fine if you can keep it up all the way from Liverpool to Boston, but when it goes down to ten or five or nothing, once you get your wind back, what's the first thing you think about?"

"Making up for lost time, of course."

"Making up lost time, in which specific time you get upwards of sixty percent of your accidents. Rate, Ross, less speed, but consistent speed. Twelve knots every hour, every day with sail or steam, even both at the same time, if you like. This is the answer, boy, this is the way out of the woods! This can get us off a dying horse and back up onto a healthy one!"



## IX

Lavinia had breakfast with Ross the following morning, during which neither of them mentioned the incident of the night before last. Shortly after eight he rode off to work. She went out for a ride, returning a little past nine to be greeted at the door by Thursby with word that she had a visitor.

"In the library, Miss Lavinia."

"Does he have a name?" she asked worriedly, knowing well enough who it was, but hoping she was mistaken.

"A Dr. Settle. He says that you know each other, or else I'd have asked him to come back."

"It's all right."

"Will he be staying for lunch?"

"No. See we're not disturbed, if you don't mind."

Settle looked distressed and exhausted, as if he hadn't slept in days. At the sight of her he began talking, without so much as a greeting.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you like this."

"I should think you would be! How could you be so stupid, showing up here?"

"Please, something's come up, a calamity, I'm afraid."

"If it's money you want, you've come to the wrong place. I haven't a red cent!"

He seemed not to have heard her, talking over her words, paying no attention whatsoever.

"A terrible thing, I'm lucky to be alive to tell of it. If I hadn't left early I shudder to think what they would have done to me!"

"What are you talking about?"

"My office, vandals, night before last. They turned the place into a shambles. I've never seen such wanton

destruction. Everything in sight smashed! My equipment, files, furniture, every window broken. I'm ruined! A policeman came, stood about like a wooden Indian scribbling in a little notebook, picked things up, dropped them, offered his heartfelt sympathy and walked out the door. Correction, the door was ripped from its hinges and shattered into a million pieces! Lavinia, they've put me out of business! I mean if I don't get the place cleaned up, refurnished, reequipped I'll lose every blessed patient I have!"

"Hardly."

"I will! I'm finished, I tell you! You must help me."

"Keep your voice down."

"I'm sorry, I'm so upset. I haven't eaten, haven't slept a wink. What am I going to do?"

"Why not go to your friend Ledion? He seems to have a strong fellow-feeling for you."

"I've already seen him. I suggested speaking to you and he agreed."

"Did he?"

"Obviously, why else would I be here? I'll need at least five thousand. Today. Of course we'll consider it a loan, at say three percent? That's fair, wouldn't you say?"

"Very, if I had five thousand dollars to lend you."

"Four!"

"Not even four hundred, I'm afraid. Your misfortune touches me deeply, Doctor, but unhappily I'm in no position to help. Apart from which I don't appreciate being blackmailed!"

"See here, I resent that! I really do! Such a thought never entered my mind. What on earth do you take me for?"

"Do you want me to answer that?"

"I helped you when you needed help. Now the shoe's on the other foot."

"I tell you I don't have any money! You squeezed

nearly two thousand out of me already. What did you do with it?"

"If you must know I made some unwise investments."

"What a pity."

Settle stopped talking only long enough to alter his approach completely. Suddenly he was no longer the wheedling supplicant. In its stead appeared a hard-eyed, self-assured extortionist. And just as speedily his request became a demand.

"I came here for money and I'm not leaving without it!"

"Well, I don't know who you think is going to give it to you. I know I'm not. There's no blood in this stone."

"What do you take me for, woman, an imbecile? I'm not blind. You live in this mansion furnished like a king's castle, servants galore waiting on you hand and foot. Why, that outfit you've got on! It must have cost at least a hundred!"

"I think you'd better leave."

"Not without my money, damn you!"

Moving to the door, she unlocked it and swung it wide. "Out."

Coming to her, he closed the door. When he spoke his voice was lower, well controlled, his words measured: "If you don't have it now, how long will it take you to get it? A day, two?"

"You don't seem to understand, even if I had it I would not give it to you. I do not like you, Doctor. You are a greedy, disgusting, two-faced bastard. I made a bargain with you, you delivered, I paid you and we're even. I don't owe you the time of day."

"I didn't say you did. I'm asking for a loan."

"And I'm turning you down."

"It's not that easy, Lavinia. We both know you can get the money if you want to. So what makes you think I'll let go of it? Suppose we talk about the other side."

"What other side?"

"What you can expect if you don't give it to me. I won't mince words. I'll go straight to the shipyard, ask to see him and tell him the whole grisly tale. Better yet, I'll write it down on a piece of paper, every juicy word, sign it and send it to him. He'll come running to see me as fast as his legs can carry him. He'll ask me a hundred questions. I'll answer every one, truthfully. There's no reason to lie. When we're done the police will come rushing up here, arrest you, clap you in jail. Need I go on?"

"And what about you? Your skirts aren't exactly immaculate. Besides, it'll be your word against mine. You implicate me, I'll deny it under oath. And who do you think he'll believe, his devoted Aunt Vinnie or some hysterical stranger with a tale straight out of a ten-cent novel?"

"You're bright, you know that, Lavinia? But not bright enough. You neglect one very important factor. Neither he nor any of the others have the remotest idea what's happened to the girl. They're dying to know. I tell him the truth of it; he'll jump to it like a trout to the bait. Why? Because he has nothing to believe and he needs something, something, Lavinia, regardless of how implausible it appears!"

"I disagree."

"Very well, suppose we try it. He either will or he won't."

"Even if he does believe you, you'll end up no better off than I. We'll both hang."

"Oh no, my dear. She's where she is now because I put her there. I and only I can bring her back here good as new. I'll give him her life in exchange for my own. A fair exchange, wouldn't you say? No, Lavinia, you'll be the only one to come out of it hurting. If you don't hang you'll get twenty years. I can just picture what life behind bars will do to that lovely skin of yours, your

beautiful warm mouth." He touched her lips. She recoiled in disgust, slapping his hand away.

"You contemptible bastard!"

"Five thousand."

"You said four."

"Five. I'll give you twenty-four hours."

"Be reasonable, I'll need time!"

"Two days."

"Three, at least."

"You've got it. I'll drop by at sundown. In cash, if you don't mind, no rings, no gold."

"Cash, only don't come here again, I beg you."

"Where then?"

"I'll come to Westerly, to your office."

"Sundown, three days, seventy-two hours. If you're ten minutes late, I'll sit down and write it all out. He'll have it in his hands first thing in the morning."

"I won't be late."

## X

The room Lisa had been sequestered in was no more than twelve feet square, with a high ceiling, flickering wall lights, and twin windows covered with metal grates looking out upon a yard below surrounded by a high wooden fence. The room smelled vaguely of ammonia, as if it had been scrubbed many days earlier and the intervening time had erased all but the slightest hint of the odor. A single elm, almost completely bereft of its leaves, stood in one corner of the yard below, the only tree in view inside the fence or beyond it. Looking at it, Lavinia got the impression that the tree was waiting for something or someone, standing there as it was in a place seemingly shunned by any other growing things. It seemed so out of place, such an obvious intruder, like Dr. John Settle thrusting himself into her life.

When he had left Blackwood the first time, when she'd watched him slink out the back door, she immediately suspected she had not seen the last of him. The situation he had created was ideal for blackmail, the perfect opportunity. His reappearance, therefore, came as no surprise. The amount he was demanding was the surprise. Where would she get such a sum, in the three days he'd given her, the three days she had begged for and gotten? The most infuriating aspect of it was the fact that she always seemed to start out calling him names, voicing her loathing for him in the clearest possible terms, only to end up begging his help, his understanding, his forgiveness. God how she despised him, his smirk, his oiliness, his duplicity, his toadying to Ledion and the vile sexual act he'd forced her to perform, done not for his pleasure as much as to humiliate her. But whatever her feelings for him, he

had to be paid this money. In three days, then again and again. From now on he would show up with a regularity she'd be able to set the clocks by.

Where would she get five thousand dollars? Not from anyone in the family, certainly. Ross would be the last person she'd ask, Cyrus next to last. She turned back to the bed, staring at Lisa lying like a wax figure of herself, eyes tightly shut, lips like white marble. Lisa had jewelry; Lavinia had seen her diamond earrings, which had belonged to Justine and which Ross had given her, along with her tiara. Where she was going she'd have no need for jewelry, but stealing it from her right under Ross's nose would be much too risky. Then too, Settle was demanding cash. Were she to pawn the pieces all of them could be too easily traced. Faking a burglary was a possibility, but just as risky. If only there were somebody who could lend her the money. The trouble was she didn't know anyone well enough. She wasn't close enough to anyone to ask for such a sum. Five thousand dollars. He might accept four thousand, for the time being at any rate. It might be enough to keep his mouth shut until she could raise more. But whom could she turn to?

Erica! Of course! She had piles of money, although one would never imagine it from the way she lived. Five thousand, fifty was nothing. She'd give it to her too. She idolized Lavinia, so she'd be grateful for the chance to help. The two of them could consider it a loan, a particularly safe one for the lender. Erica would know she'd get it back with interest once Ross was won over and Lisa done away with. Dear, sweet Erica! She'd march straight to her door the minute she left the hospital.

Lavinia opened the door for a look at the corridor clock. Twenty-five minutes to five. At that moment Ross rounded the far corner, starting down the gloomy corridor, sighting her, waving greeting.

"How is she?" She shrugged. "I know, what's the

point in asking?" Bending over the bed, he kissed Lisa, pulling his hand over hers almost gingerly, reluctant to make contact, as if she repelled him. "I love this. I hate it! It's got me in such a turmoil inside. I've been doing a lot of thinking, Vinnie."

"About what?"

"This, what else? A different kind of thinking, trying to stretch my mind beyond this." He gestured. "Hospital, doctors, the medical. I'm wondering if what's wrong with her really is physical. I mean, could it be, well, spiritual? Like those Tibetan monks who claim they leave their bodies, their physical selves."

"That sounds terribly far-fetched, Ross."

"What do you call this? I just wonder if maybe the reason Craven and the others can't pin it down is because it's beyond their knowledge and training, beyond any medicine or surgery. That instead it's—it's—"

"It's what? Does it have a name?"

"Whatever you call her mind gone out of her and with it all control over her physical self, her senses, her organs. You know what I'm trying to say."

"I think I do, I'm doing my best to keep up."

"Do you think it might be worth bringing in some sort of specialist?"

"What sort?"

"I don't know, I have no idea. I'd have to talk with Craven."

"You'd be stepping on his toes."

"That's the last thing I worry about. Besides, lately I get the feeling he'd love to get rid of this one, even if it meant my firing him. These last few days when I talk with him I seem to sense that he's given up completely. He's reached a point where he's just going through the motions. It's gotten so I want to grab him around the neck and shake the life out of the son-of-a-bitch! And don't say he's doing his best. I get so sick of hearing those four words I want to vomit!"



"Calm down."

"It's in his eyes, the tone of his voice, this giving up I mean. You know his sort, give it his all, never say die, Mr. Optimist. All that's gone out of him, Vinnie, ever since Waller showed up, examined her and went crawling back to Philadelphia with his tail between his legs. Craven warned us not to get our hopes up, yes, but I thought then, and I still think, he himself was hoping and praying with all his might Waller would come up with the answer. More than hoping and praying. I think he sold himself on Waller completely, and when nothing came of it, Craven came out of it feeling like he'd had the stuffing knocked out of him with one punch!"

"So talk to him, about the possibility it's not medical. Why not get all of them together and spring it on them? And pin them down, get an answer."

"You bet I will!"

"Though I must say I don't know what they could possibly tell you."

"That's the torture part of this thing. I swear, it's driving me right out of my mind! It's like we've got to run a hundred yards and something we can't see or hear or feel is keeping us from taking even the first step. That's how far we are from solving it. And meanwhile the days and nights go by and she gets weaker and weaker."

"Craven doesn't say that."

"For God's sakes, Vinnie, he doesn't have to! It's plain goddamned common sense! I know one thing, if he ever tried to tell me she isn't getting weaker, I'd break his jaw, and he knows it! Useless bastards, all of them. Helpless slobs standing around rubbing their chins, mumbling to each other like spear carriers in some comic opera, sneaking guilty glances at me."

"I wish you wouldn't go on like this. You get all churned up inside, blow and blow, and finally get to where you realize it's all futile and you stop and start

winding back down. You can't keep on abusing yourself so, it's very bad for you."

"If I don't let it out once in awhile—"

"Better you fight with somebody. Fight with Cyrus, he enjoys it."

"Does he ever!"

She got up. "I'll leave you alone, do you mind? I have to do some shopping. When do you plan to talk to Craven?"

"As soon as he can round up the others, the sooner the better."

"Do you want me there?"

"Yes."

"Just remember, whatever they tell you or don't tell you you've got to keep your temper. They're all we've got; we need them. They might come up with something. There's no point in alienating them."

They met with Craven and three other doctors, including James Bunning, the next afternoon in Bunning's office. They seemed, to Lavinia, eager to be helpful, but their responses to Ross's questions elicited nothing of substance. It became apparent that any explanation other than a medical or surgical one was automatically shunted into the realm of fantasy, although they did manage to keep straight faces when he brought up the subject of Tibet. When it became evident that nothing was to be gained by further discussion, Craven closed the door on the subject.

"If you don't mind, Ross, I'd like to get to something else."

The room was cold, she thought, filled with a gloomy ambience, the molding and door of dark oak, the bilious green walls and ceiling, the mustiness of the air contributing to the impression. How anyone could work in such an unpleasant place was more than she could understand. As drab as it was, Lisa's room was warmth personified in comparison.

Craven glanced at the others, as if to assure himself of their moral support and cleared his throat. "I don't have to tell you that all of us are working very hard on this. I can say with certainty that we've done everything humanly possible. What we haven't tried we hesitate to attempt for fear the reaction may inflict irreparable harm." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Ross, what I'm about to tell you will upset you very much. And you'll have every right to be upset. All I ask is that you hold your temper, hear what I have to say, all of it. When I'm done I want you to think it over, a day, a week, if you like. Then I'll want you to give me your decision."

"You're giving up on her, is that it?"

"We feel it's useless going on like this. She's never going to come out of it, Ross. She's simply going to waste away until the little life that's still in her will stop. We've done all we can to prevent it, but what it amounts to wouldn't fill a thimble. To be very blunt about it, it's something we can't handle."

"That's not exactly news to me, Doctor, though I will say your candor is most refreshing. But let me understand you clearly: you can't do anything for her, so rather than let nature take its course, rather than drag things out, you've all voted to put her away."

"We simply feel it's the Christian thing to do, Mr. Dandridge," said Bunning quietly, "the only thing to do."

"Is that so? Do you hear this, Vinnie? Here we sit in the company of these eminent physicians, these gifted healers, this very special fraternity dedicated to curing, prolonging life and what are they doing but politely requesting my permission to murder her."

"Ross—" began Craven.

"Let me finish, Doctor. Let's see if I can make myself see it from your side. It all began as a challenge, didn't it? Unique from every angle. The first day, the second

day, into the second week it was pull out all the stops, find what was causing it, treat it, cure her. But you couldn't find it. Now it's getting to be embarrassing, now comes the finger-pointing, the snickering, at you, Doctor, all of you. By now every doctor in the East is either sympathizing with you or laughing at you. Worst of all was bringing her here, putting her insoluble problem case on exhibition. Now the whole business has sapped your patience, you've had it up to your eyes and you wish it would go away. You'd like me to press the button for you. What's that supposed to do, ease your consciences? Forget it. The answer is 'No.' Flat out and loud enough so you can't possibly misunderstand me. No!

"I'll tell you what we can do, though. Dr. Craven, as of right now, consider yourself off this case. All of you, you're off! From now on you're not to go near her room! I will get another doctor, thank you. I think we could use a fresh approach."

"Whatever you say, Ross," said Craven evenly.

"Where's your sigh of relief, Doctor? Don't hold it in."

"One moment." Bunning was on his feet, his rugged features dark with anger, his jaw rigid. "You're entitled to be upset, Mr. Dandridge. Under the circumstances it's understandable."

"Very generous of you, Doctor."

"But you have no right taking it out on Alex. This wasn't his idea, it was mine. All of us discussed it at length, great length and the decision was unanimous. Going on the way we're going is pointless and futile. But I'll be damned if I'll stand by and watch you work him over with your stupid sarcasm. He's been slaving night and day, going without sleep, skipping meals, buttonholing everyone of us every chance he gets trying to find the answer. Sir, you should be down on your knees thanking him! Instead you have the

almighty gall to dress him down? Not in front of me, you don't!"

"Easy, James." Craven touched his arm. "Ross, if you want another doctor, I'll get you one."

"I'll get my own."

"Whatever you like. I can only hope you have better luck than you've had with me."

"I can't do any worse."

"Ross, if you want me to defend myself, I'm afraid I'm not up to it. I'm a little too tired to be bothered. Still, there is one thing you might bear in mind, in respect to a new man, that is. You could bring somebody in whom you'll have a great deal more faith in. But whoever he is, I can't believe he'll be able to do anything for her. The point I'm trying to make is that even though I've failed, I've never made any effort to deceive you. I've made it clear from the beginning what we're up against."

"What he's trying to tell you is the next man may not be quite so honorable," said Bunning. "He may very well milk you for every cent you've got, all the while filling you with optimistic nonsense, keeping your hopes as high as his bills."

Another doctor spoke up, a man Craven had earlier introduced as Seward. He had been among those at the house when Augustus Waller had arrived, a powerfully-built older man with a pugnacious air.

"You think it's easy for us to tell you two we think it's over and she should be helped to die? You think we get some sort of twisted satisfaction out of it? If you do, you're stupid! Whatever you think doesn't change the facts; that woman is going to die within two, three weeks at most."

"We'll see," said Ross.

"You're damned right we will! I can give you my personal guarantee she will. Only because there's nothing on God's green earth to prevent it! What we're

asking you to do is no different than what we'd ask the husband or wife of any terminal patient when common sense dictates the patient be put out of his misery!"

"Doctor, if she were in great pain, I might understand your eagerness to help her along. I'm not saying I'd agree to it, but at least I'd see something like the logic of it. But she's in no pain, she's sleeping like a baby."

Craven stared at him somberly. "We happen to be thinking of you as well as your wife. Maybe you haven't taken a good look in the mirror lately, but you're obviously not in the best of shape. You're a disaster! You don't sleep, you eat like a bird, you're losing weight, the strain is ruining you. How long do you think you can stand up under it?"

"As long as I have to."

"Then you may count on two or three weeks."

"You're a cold-hearted bastard, you know that, Craven?"

"We're getting into personalities," snapped Bunning. "Let's break it up. If your answer is no, Mr. Dandridge, no it shall be. Our facilities here will continue to be at your disposal for as long as you'll need them. If you don't want any of us to help you find another doctor, if you'd rather do it on your own, go ahead."

Back in Lisa's room, Lavinia confronted him. "If you don't mind my saying so I think that was all completely unnecessary," she said. "I think you're making a terrible mistake."

"About Craven? I don't."

"You're reacting much too strongly. They asked you a simple question, with a simple yes or no answer. All they wanted from you was a decision."

"With their recommendation."

"They seemed perfectly willing to accept 'no'! Now what are you going to do for a doctor?"

"There's no shortage of doctors, Vinnie."

"If you ask me I say go back and talk to Craven."

Tell him you're sorry, tell him you know he's doing his best. Ross, he's the best doctor around, the most intelligent, conscientious, by far the most dedicated. He was taking care of all of us before you were born. He brought you into the world. He's seen every one of us through crises. He's done more for the Dandridges than any three doctors have done for any family. To push him away like this is completely wrong!"

For a long time he made no response, his eyes on Lisa, his thoughts seemingly miles away.

"Who are you going to get to replace him?"

"All right, all right, I'll go crawling back to him. All the same, he's got his answer. The trouble with him, with all of them is they don't understand. I love her more than I love my life. She is my life. I could never do such a thing, never!"

"Of course not, I understand perfectly."

"Thank the Lord somebody does!"

## XI

On the afternoon of the third day of the time allotted her by Settle, Lavinia took the train to Westerly, found her way to Hanover Street and went directly to the office. Her timing proved almost perfect, her arrival coinciding with sunset, the fire of the day finding the horizon, consuming neighboring Pawkatuck to the west. All the way down on the train she had thought about Settle and the omnipresent threat he posed, with Ledion supporting him. Going to the Master, urging Him to intervene on her behalf, would have been a waste of time. Settle was playing games with her, and Ledion, seated in the audience, seemed to be thoroughly amused by his efforts. Hadn't Settle claimed it was Ledion's idea to approach her? The doctor was a congenital liar, but that much had to be truth.

Ascending the stairs to the office, she was surprised to see the glass door intact. Opening it slowly, she found the interior in perfect order, nothing broken, nor destroyed, nor even out of place. Settle was in the examining room, standing in vest and shirtsleeves poring over some papers attached to a board, one foot up on a chair balancing the board on his knee.

"Well, well, well, right on time."

"You liar! Vandals ransacking the place, indeed! Of all the despicable tricks—"

"Please, don't begrudge me a little dramatic effect." He licked his lips. "You've brought it, of course."

It was too much. What she would do upon arriving had been crystal clear in her mind, a decision reached two days earlier and reinforced with every passing hour since. Sight of the office intact, seeing the smirk on his face again, his unctuous manner, the greedy gleam in



his eyes, the triumph in his voice were all she needed.

"Of course."

"Excellent. You're a very sensible woman, Lavinia."

Reaching into her bag, she jerked out the knife, the same knife she had used on the wolf. Changing its direction without stopping her hand, she plunged it squarely into his stomach. His smile vanished, a look of incredible astonishment seizing his features. Gagged deep in his throat, he dropped the board and staggered backwards clutching the knife hilt with both hands. He tried to pull it out, but there was no strength in his fingers. A circle of blood appeared around the hilt, spreading outward, drenching his white shirt. Down clattered his chair, and down he went into a sitting position, his back flush against the wall. His eyes bulged, rolled up in their sockets and he fell over.

Gritting her teeth, she pulled the knife out slowly. It felt as if she were pulling it out of a sack of cornmeal, so little resistance was there. Glancing about, she found a roll of gauze, wiped the blade clean and put the knife back in her bag. Then she walked out, adjusting the lock, and closing the door behind her.

## XII

Lisa handed her the book, and Elison opened it a third of the way, disclosing a white, dried to dirty brown flower pressed between the pages.

"Pick it up." Lisa did so, holding it gingerly by a stem nearly seven inches long. "Smell it." Its bedraggled appearance belied its lovely fragrance. "Now, hold it directly in front of me with the tips of your thumbs and forefingers only. Mind the thorns."

Lisa looked on as Elison cupped her hands about the withered blossom, concealing it completely, whispered a few words, blew lightly upon her hands, whispered another phrase, then slowly took away her hands.

The rose had changed to metal, what appeared to be paper thin gold, and it felt heavier in her grasp.

Elison laughed. "A parlor trick, like lighting candles with your fingertip."

The thumping started over their heads.

"I guess she's ready," said Lisa.

Elison had set up a small table in front of the old woman, draping it with a paisley shawl covering it to the floor. On the table, set on an ivory stand, was a crystal ball.

"Sit," said the old woman without looking up as they entered the room.

She had been scrying and had much to tell Lisa. In her grating, monosyllabic tone, somewhat suggestive of Elison's own, she told them of Blackwood, describing it accurately. She spoke of Ross and Lavinia, Ledion and a man "as skinny as a corpse" who had read and chanted and otherwise worked the black magic which had taken possession of Lisa's inner self, sending her back in time. She explained how this was done, al-

though she could not say why. She didn't have to. In Lisa's mind her suspicions had long ago assumed the substance of hard facts.

"But you're saying I can go back! It's possible!"

"It can be done, yes. But not by him. He is dead, I saw his shade."

"The stranger?"

"The one who looks like a corpse. Now he is one, all the blood drained from his body."

"My God," said Lisa.

"That's not bad, that's good," said Elison. "If he sent you, he can stop you from coming back. Now he's out of the picture completely."

"Anybody can stop me, simply by destroying my body!"

"There's more, go on, Lucilla."

"She's right. I have seen that danger in the ball. The witch."

"Lavinia."

"She would destroy your body. I have seen the looks she gives you when she is in the room watching over the bed, eyes filled with evil."

"What's keeping her from doing it?" asked Elison.

"I did not see. I can only tell you that if you wish to go back, the sooner the better."

"It won't be that difficult," said Elison encouragingly.

"The only one who worries me is this Ledion. If it all started with Him, He's certain to be very annoyed at any outside interference. I must admit there are times I have very strong reservations, the feeling that to hold back, to stay out of it is the right thing to do."

"You gave me your word."

"I know, and I won't go back on it. But that doesn't keep me from second thoughts."

"It is wrong," said the old woman coldly, pointing her finger at Lisa. "Your trouble is not ours. Why must you insist on making it so?"

"You're the only ones who can help me!"

"Let's not get into that," said Elison. "Lisa, you go on downstairs. Get back to studying. The quicker you learn it all the better, the sooner we can do it. One week from tonight we will attend a sabat, a business meeting. We must add your name to the list of postulants."

"How long will it take me?"

"Who can say? You're a remarkably fast learner. If all goes well, if you pass your tests and you're accepted, there's no reason for any delay."

"But how long?"

"It depends upon how long it takes you to master everything. Possibly a month."

"That's too long, too risky. Even two weeks is too long!"

"We shall see. Now leave us."

### XIII

Cyrus had insisted on going for a walk, a brief stroll, just far enough to stretch his legs and had prevailed upon Ross to go along. They discussed Craven and the situation, unable to avoid considering the abject hopelessness of things. The fact that Craven, Bunning and the other doctors had voiced their grisly suggestion, in spite of Ross's total rejection of it, only served to deepen his discouragement. It was as if the world itself had given up on her, leaving him alone clinging to his hopes, Craven and the others standing about in a circle looking down at him, shaking their heads in disapproval. But to deliberately take what was left of her life—

"It's outrageous! How could they even think such a thing? How could he?"

"Doctors are a practical breed, Ross. They consider things in terms of right and wrong; they're very practiced at shutting out the emotions altogether. They make their decisions from their professional wisdom, not their feelings."

"Are you implying you agree with them?"

"I'm not implying anything!" They walked in single file down a narrow, twisting path, leading from the rose garden in the rear of the house to the foothills a quarter-mile distant, Cyrus in the lead. It was late in the afternoon, the sky stuffed with fat white clouds, the air filled with the scent of pine clear and clean on the breath. A woodchuck trundled across their path without slowing, without looking at them. Cyrus pointed at him with his stick and grinned.

"That one's fat enough for two winters."

"Then you disagree."

"It's a fairly weighty decision, wouldn't you say? The sort of thing one doesn't jump to a quick yes or no on."

"That tells me one thing. You do think there's something in their opinion. I'm sorry to hear it."

"I don't know what you heard, I haven't said a word. Then again, maybe yes or no isn't the most important thing. I don't want to get your dander up, but the only thing I am sure of is that the longer she stays that way, the worse it becomes. How can the poor thing possibly survive without nourishment? How could anyone? It's already been over a month. What I'm trying to say is you'd best face up to the fact that she could go anytime. Whether or not she's put away may not be the point at all. Like I say I don't want to upset you. Good God, there's been hurt enough under our roof these past weeks. But I can't help believing you're sapping your energies, your health, and everything else defending what amounts to a lost cause. If I were you I'd be preparing for the worst. You do and maybe what Alex is suggesting won't seem so outrageous after all. I'm not making a judgment, I'm not saying agree with him. I'm only saying you ought to maybe start thinking about how you plan to deal with it, if worse comes to 'worst. To brace yourself."

"I know, let's change the subject."

Suddenly, all the strength seemed to seep out of his pores, the last of his battle energy deserting him. Stopping, he stared at the ground and as he did so he felt as if unseen hands were taking him by the throat and slowly squeezing the life out of him.

Hope. What was it but a self-made shield thrown over reality, a little honey in his medicine to sweeten the taste of it? Medicine life forced him to down whether he chose to or not. He despised himself for giving in to the feeling, but it rooted itself in his thoughts and try as he was able he could not scour his mind of it. Hope, blind faith, could carry him just so

far and no further. Over the edge ahead, the land dropped a thousand feet.

"What in God's name is the use?"

Cyrus, walking ahead of him, turned. "You say something?"

"No."

In deference to Ross's state of mind, Lavinia chose not to press the advantage the potion had gained her. Rather she contented herself, at least temporarily, with the great good feeling of relief that had arrived immediately upon Settle's departure. She had taken pains to return the murder weapon to the kitchen drawer, after washing it thoroughly. Ridding herself of Settle not only removed the threat of further blackmail, but also did away with the one person capable of bringing back Lisa. Had she challenged his threat, he might very well have gone straight to Ross. Which would have meant bringing Lisa back in exchange for cleaning his slate in the whole affair.

As for Ledion, she had to concede that he had been right all along. The change in Ross's attitude toward her was depressingly slow in evolving, but she could distinguish it. He seemed to be privately readying himself for the inevitable, in spite of his professions of loyalty. When the fatal day arrived his dear Aunt Vinnie would be at hand to comfort and console him. And each of them having lost the one they held most dear there would be nothing in the way of their finally coming together.

A large church wedding? No. Better a brief courtship and a quiet ceremony, without fanfare or celebration. In the meantime, let him take her to his bed a second time, a third, until the potion was no longer required, until Lisa for him, like Gray for her, was relegated to painful but mercifully fast dimming memory.

Ross stood to benefit fully as much as she. For him she

would do all the things Lisa never could. There would be criticism, both covert and obvious from those in their circle. That was to be expected. But as time went on and everyone became used to the idea, as the Harringtons, the Caldwells, the Overstreets, even Cyrus, saw how happy they were their marriage would have to be accepted. Anyone so boorishly stubborn as to refuse to accept it would only make himself appear absurd.

She was glad she'd had second thoughts about asking Erica for the money, not that the old woman would have hesitated to give it to her. But meeting Settle's demands would only have whetted his appetite for more. He would have been back for more in no time, reminding her of the consequences she faced should she fail to pay him. He would have bled her dry. Bleeding *him* solved everything.

Her heart had thumped so as she'd thrust the knife into him and watched him stagger back for a moment she felt it would burst like a balloon. But once it was over and she'd drawn the knife and wiped it clean, gotten out of there and down into the street to mingle with the crowd, a glorious feeling of relief, a heady exhilaration had come over her. Freeing herself of the shackle, starting out unfettered and anew, the whole business would now go as smoothly as the train over the rails whisking her back to Providence.



## XIV

The esbat was to be held in the privacy of a secluded grove of trees in Southwark. They crossed the river by way of the Horse Ferry, walking over the lush green meadows quilted with the heavy fragrance of wildflowers, between houses, and under the forbidding walls of the Marshalsea Prison. Lisa stared upward as they passed, noting the spikes crowning the prison's heights. London's enduring monument to man's inhumanity to man. Collect the errant and the indigent, stir them together like raisins and pudding, hide them away, feed them, flog them, forget them.

They reached the rendezvous. Thirteen witches, Elison included, were assembled, the usual number for a coven according to her. The day had been insufferably hot, with little promise of relief with the onset of darkness, even out here away from the cramped and stagnant inner city. Breathing set one's nostrils and throat tingling with an uncomfortable near-burning sensation and Lisa was grateful for the bottle of cold wine brought along by Elison.

The meeting proved to be businesslike to the point of boredom, with no rituals, no ceremonies, nothing but endless discussion and argument—a project involving a prospective pact with another coven to take over a house in Kentish Town inherited by one of its number, argument over what to do about the arrest and incarceration of a warlock, concern over a rumored hunt by the constables, purportedly as widespread and conscientious as those carried out during the reign of James I . . . Lisa was introduced and her name added to the list of candidates, food and drink were served, and

at eleven-thirty, the meeting was formally concluded and she and Elison started back to Tilt Yard.

The quarter moon appeared, a celestial earring depending from an enormous blue-bellied cloud; stars punctured the sky, and the Thames lapped softly at its banks as it carried itself lazily down to the North Foreland of Kent.

"This weather is perfect for the distemper," lamented Elison. "From now until fall the bills of mortality will get as long as the river. Every day they're closing up more and more houses, every day more and more doors with red crosses and 'Lord have mercy upon us' scrawled on them."

"I can't wait to get back and soak in the tub."

"You and your baths, morning and night, boiling water, filling that tub, scrubbing yourself raw. Such a lot of time and trouble for nothing."

"An ounce of prevention."

"It's in the air, child, soap and water can't prevent it."

"They can help. I wish you'd bathe, I'd gladly prepare the water for you."

"I haven't the time to waste. Besides, I'll never catch it."

"You might think of Lucilla."

Elison laughed good-naturedly. "I doubt she's been ill once in her entire life. I know she's never seen a doctor, not that she'd trust one to touch her. She's like a tortoise, given all those years she's developed a shell that protects her against everything everybody else catches. Her bowel's the only thing gives her trouble, the one thing out of kilter that proves she's not stone outside and iron in. I'll wager you a sovereign to tup-pence that you, with all your soap and water, catch it before either of us."

"I shan't worry unless the tub breaks."

"You'll know if it comes. Your head will ache, your fever shoot up so you feel like you're burning to a cinder. Then come the boils in the groin."

"Do you mind?"

They walked along, Elison insisting she recite the names of the Prince of Darkness.

"Gadon, Ameal, Orma, Desult." On and on, until they came within sight of the alley leading to the yard.

"You're doing splendidly, child. All that's left now is the Book of Shadows. You get it down pat and you'll be all ready."

"Providing they accept me."

"I think we can be optimistic about that. If when it's over, you get a cheer and you see white stones only being tossed into the consecrated circle, your worries will be over."

"If I see any black ones I'll throw them back! But seriously, how long does the testing go on?"

"It extends over a period of four nights, but the second and third nights there's no activity, no getting together, nothing."

"Why the delay?"

"The cleansing and purifying of your blood is part of the first night's ceremonies. It's a blow to the system. Once it's over you're in no condition to do much more than lie down and sleep, get your strength back. Then on the fourth night we start at midnight and go right on through until dawn. Think you'll be up to it all?"

"All I need is the *Book of Shadows*. I've copied it, but I'm just starting studying it."

"Once you memorize it, you must destroy it. You must burn it and bury the ashes, just as I'll be doing with mine now you've made your copy."

"I understand."

They had come within sight of the alley leading to the yard when suddenly a young man leaning heavily on a crudely-fashioned crutch came hobbling into view. His shrill voice was like a knife point pricking Lisa's eardrums:

"Then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues and

of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance."

Erica rushed to him. "Geoffrey, Geoffrey!" Taking him by the shoulders, she turned to Lisa. "He's demented, poor boy. He must have gotten out while his mother's sleeping. It's dangerous for him to be roaming about alone. Geoffrey, listen to me, I'm going to take you home, dear." He gaped at her, his saturnine features reflecting confusion. Then he hung his head shyly like a small boy.

"Home."

"Go on ahead, Lisa, I'll be right along." She pressed the key into her hand. "Leave the door unlocked and wait downstairs for me."

"Very well."

She went on in the direction of the yard and came within sight of the herbarium. Suddenly, for no explicable reason, thoughts of Ross and Providence flashed through her mind. With any luck at all, it would only be a few days now. Days that would seem like weeks, perhaps, but fashioning a definable ending to it all, this nightmare imprisoning her mind and conscience. Dear God how she missed him, how she'd survived this long without him was a small miracle in itself!

"My dearest darling Ross, patience, my darling, patience."

Hurrying her step, she reached the door, fumbling the key into place. Suddenly she became aware of someone behind her, heavy steps coming up quickly. A hand reached around from behind, grabbing her forearm. Panic seized her, constricting her throat, stifling her breath, stopping her cry.

"Netty, Netty, Netty, what a sight for sore eyes! Where have you been, darling dear?"

There were two of them and in the angry glow of his companion's lantern held up beside his face, Simon looked ghastly. His cheeks glistened with dirty sweat

and one eye was puffed up so that the skin had become taut almost to the point of splitting, the eye itself hidden almost entirely, and with a black scab running from his forehead down through the upper and lower lids to the middle of his cheek.

"You!"

"Who else? My, my, it's been a long time. Hasn't it, though? Perilous long. I've tracked you a million miles, darling dear."

"Let's get on with it," said the other man impatiently. By the lantern light she saw now that he was wearing a watchman's uniform and carrying a staff in his other hand.

"Take it easy, Mr. Charlie.\* Here we are, all signed and dated proper legal-like." Simon thrust a rolled-up document into his hand. "I'm not seeing so well these days, Netty, what with, as you can see, one eye practically unfunctioning."

The watchman had unrolled the paper and was reading it silently to himself, his dark lips moving rapidly. His eyes went back to the top and he read aloud: "Be it known to all those in the law and assigned representatives that Janet Edith Stiles, an unmarried white woman described as being of medium height with blonde hair and gray eyes, previously residing in Blyth, presently residing in Mansfield, is hereby accused of the willful murder of one Megan O'Donaugh, which foul act was performed by accused in Mansfield on the morning of the first day instant."

"You're insane, the two of you! Let go of my arm!"

"There's more." The watchman wet his lips, cleared his fat, red throat and continued: "Accused is to be seized wherever found and held for trial. By order of

\*Prior to 1749, London had no established police force. A nightly watch established in the reign of Charles II was composed of watchmen, mainly older, otherwise unemployed men, called Charlies, the ancestors of today's policemen.

Leland James Walter Thornley, Chief Magistrate, Mansfield Parish. June one, in the year of our blessed Lord, 1665."

"Which in short means you're to be placed under bloody arrest, you heartless creature you!" exclaimed Simon.

"*You* killed her!"

"Tut, tut, tut." He glanced at the other man and smiled. "Ever notice how the guilty ones is so quick to fling mud on them what helps bring them to account?"

"Don't listen to him, he's the one you should be arresting!"

"I ain't arresting nobody, I ain't empowered to. All I do is make sure this here paper is all in order and then march you to the house of the nearest marshal, which would be Mr. Joseph Tallow in Ulster Mews. It's for him to arrest you and fetch you to prison."

"But I didn't kill her, he did! I can prove it!"

"That you'll have your chance to do in the assize." She began struggling. "Let go of me!"

"Here now, let's have none o' that. Come along quietly, else you'll force me to use me stick."

"Elison!"

Simon's hand clamped over her mouth and he pinned her arms behind her, locking her wrists in his fist. Together they took her writhing and struggling to Ulster Mews. Marshal Tallow was roused out of a sound sleep, for which he was something less than grateful, accepted the magistrate's order, took possession of the prisoner and locked her in an upstairs room for what was left of the night.

At seven o'clock the next morning she was fed—downed gruel and a hoecake between continuing loud protestations of innocence—and in company with a doddering old thief and a sailor charged with smuggling linen from Belgium, escorted across the Thames to Southwark and the grim walled world of Marshalsea Prison.

## XV

There was still enough potion for three, possibly four more applications left in the soot-stained can, mused Lavinia, grateful for the comfort the thought gave her. She sat before her mirror admiring herself and deciding that never before in her life had she looked quite so beautiful, so "stunning in the classic manner," as Gray had once so lavishly phrased it. Beautiful and youthful, not a line, not even the suggestion of a wrinkle across her throat, not one gray hair. She drew her fingertips down her cheek; the skin glowed like a child's. To be sure, the crow's-feet would come, the delicate lines at either end of her mouth, gathering, deepening, scoring her loveliness, as if to punish her for having done everything within her power to postpone their arrival. The lines, the wrinkles, the gray hairs, the flesh losing its elasticity, its look of aliveness. Even without the outward manifestations, the eyes would betray the beginning, a melancholy look of inner suffering and regret, mute acknowledgment that decay was upon her, come to feast.

But not yet, she told herself. There was nothing in the world that would hold it off longer, resist it with more obstinacy than the singular circumstance of being married to one half one's age. Like great good humor or a freshet of uncontrollable pity, youth was a quality that could be absorbed by one close to him who had it. And Ross made her feel younger and more alive than she had felt in years.

She would play a game. She would count and on the instant she uttered the number 25, his knock would come at her door and he would speak her name. She would open the door and reel him in like a fish on a

line. It was all so easy, so predictable, like watching a chick hatch, the egg stirring, the first crack appearing, the small fragment of shell dislodged, the opening enlarging . . .

Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty.

The soft tapping. "Vinnie?"

Tossing her head back, she bit her lip to stifle a giggle. She opened the door. In his eagerness he was almost panting as he brushed by her, striding into the room. Shutting and bolting the door, she turned and he took her in his arms, holding her so tightly she could scarcely move a muscle. He kissed her, unleashing the fire within him, sending it rushing through her, setting her whole body trembling. She gave her kiss in return, her mouth devouring his ravenously, draining his desire.

He picked her up, carrying her to the bed without a word, without a sound but for his husky breathing.

"Ross. Ross, slowly, darling."

If he heard her he made no sign. In moments they were stripped and lying locked in one another's arms. They began playing, the soul-lifting, mind-giddy searching and seeking of small pleasures stolen from each other, gathered and woven into an all pervasive, total gratification of the senses. She luxuriated in him, as if his flesh were suddenly without substance and she was able to slip inside him, into his warmth, into the core of his fire, becoming part of him, dislodging his heart and mind and soul.

It was magnificent, from the first thrust to the last exhausted sigh, a symphony of movement, transport swiftly and on certain course to a world where the sense of touch reigned supreme. My husband, she thought, kindler of this fire in my flesh. There is no other, no one outside the door, nor in this house, nor in the world. No one or nothing but the two of us, side by side, our bodies one for all eternity.

He stayed for hours, unwilling to release her, un-



wanting even to move with her under the covers. In time the blackness spread across the windows began to lose its intensity; dawn, gray and grave, came stealing over Blackwood, and rising he kissed her, dressed and left the room.

Two hours later at breakfast neither mentioned, nor even so much as hinted at what had transpired. And she was relieved to see that the previous assault upon his conscience was not about to be repeated, at least not immediately. Perhaps, she hoped, the realistic side of his nature was arousing itself and quelling his conscience. If he could get through his day and return home that night with the same tolerance it would be the beautiful beginning of the end.

There was, nevertheless, one sour note in the melody of the morning. It occurred when Cyrus appeared, coming down the stairs, pausing on the third step from the bottom at the sight of her helping Ross into his jacket as he was about to leave.

"Good morning, Grandfather," said Ross pleasantly.

Cyrus said nothing, but he made no effort to conceal the disapproval in his eyes as he passed the two of them on his way into the dining room.

"He must have put in a bad night," said Ross quietly. "Did you see that look he gave us?"

"Gave me," said Lavinia in a subdued voice.

At ten o'clock she returned from a walk with Mody just as a teen-age boy with a shock of black hair to rival his horse's mane came thundering up the drive.

"Good morning, ma'am, is this the Dandridge house?"

"Yes, who are you looking for?"

Out of the inside pocket of his jacket came a small blue envelope. He began reading. "La-vin-vin—"

"That's me, I'll take it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Reining his mount around, he was off with a lunge, out of the circle and clattering down the road to town.

She opened the envelope. The writing was in a crabbed hand, tidy, but pinched together in an all but spaceless string.

*"Lavinia,*

*You must come at 11 tonight. I must see you!*  
*E."*

Crumpling the note, she tossed it away, then caught herself, retrieving it and stuffing it into her pocket. How annoying! What on earth did she want? She might at least have explained. Why the mystery? Clearly, whatever it was was urgent. Maybe she should go over there at once and see what it was all about.

Erica, Erica. She couldn't want anything from her; what did she have to give her? A favor, perhaps? Not asked of her, but offered. Her thoughts went to Ledion, only because the last time she'd been to Erica's it was to meet with Him.

There was no possible way He could connect her with Settle's death. He might suspect her, He'd be a fool not to, but no way He could prove she did it. Had He instructed Erica to write and ask her to come? Very possible. Whenever He wanted her He invariably went through Erica. If He accused her of murdering Settle, she'd deny it emphatically, without a moment's hesitation. She'd fly into a rage of resentment at such an "asinine accusation, so unfair! It just isn't true!" Ledion could read her thoughts, but knowing that was to her advantage. She'd take special pains to keep her mind clear, as empty as a bucket, my dear! There was nothing to be afraid of. He didn't frighten her in the least; He enjoyed copulating with her too much to inspire anything like fear. There wasn't a male alive she was afraid of, with the possible exception of the horned toad. The look he'd given her that morning would have melted brass!

Ledion. Face Him, stand up to Him, deny it completely, insist she hadn't been within miles of Westerly

since her first meeting with Settle, hear His tirade in respectful silence, shrug it off and leave. He'd bear no grudge. If He did, she'd free His mind of it the next time she got Him between her thighs.

The day held one more bright spot for her before nightfall reminded her of the necessity for her presence at Erica's at eleven. Ross came home from the hospital wearing a sober look, but with no pangs of conscience worth describing to her. If within he was under siege he was doing an estimable job of hiding it. In a way, he surprised her. It was as if Lisa had already died, been buried, mourned over, and pushed to a remote corner of his memory. Maybe, in spite of himself, he had become resigned to the inevitable, turning away from the pathetic shell that had once been the woman he'd loved, turning toward the vibrant, receptive, beautiful woman Lavinia could scarcely deny she was.

On second thought, maybe she was giving him too much credit. What made him different from any other man? She'd never seen one who wasn't capable of cheating on the woman he loved, his betrothed or his wife. It wasn't even a game with most of them, more like a duty, opportunity provided by nature to prove their masculinity. To whom? To themselves, of course. And those who doubted themselves most severely always seemed the most promiscuous, playing the field, conquests galore. So like Ross himself in his headier, younger years. He was hardly conquering now, though, more like sampling. Time enough for gorging himself after it was all over. Now was the time for winning him over, planting the seeds. The more patience she showed, the longer the stretches between their lovemaking, the greater his lust, and eventually the deeper and more sincere his love for her. She might even go so far as to fire his loins with the potion, then lock him out. It would be viciously cruel, but, oh, so tempting. He'd probably break the door down. They always talked about bitches in heat. She smiled inwardly, what about

the bastards? Was their heat any less intense, any easier to hold in check?

She excused herself to Cyrus and Ross at ten-thirty that night, claiming the need to go into town.

"At this hour?" asked Ross. "What for?"

"A friend, Jane Coward. She's having a baby. She's due any day now. Her husband's away in Virginia on business; she's all alone and she practically begged me to come and visit with her. I couldn't say no to her. It'll just be for an hour or so."

Cyrus set down his empty brandy glass and shook his head disapprovingly. "It's none o' my business, but I can't see gallivanting downtown this time o' night for sour apples. It's just not safe."

"I'm not afraid. The streets are well lit."

"Can't you see her tomorrow during the day?" asked Ross.

"She's at the doctor's most of every day. She's not having a very easy time of it. The thing is I promised her I'd get over tonight. I would have gone earlier, but she's been in Pawtucket all day at her sister's and didn't get back until about now."

"Why don't you go along, Ross?" said Cyrus.

"Gladly."

"That's good of you, Ross, but I don't think you'd really want to. It'll be all woman talk, from the moment we walk in. You'd be bored stiff. I'd have to wake you up out of a sound sleep when it's time to go." She got up. "I'll be back before midnight, I promise. Please don't worry, either of you."

"Suit yourself," said Cyrus crisply. "I don't know about you, Ross, but it's past my bedtime."

She slipped the horse's reins through the house ring and looped them securely, then ascended the stairs to Erica's. Knocking, she waited. She listened intently; there was no sound within, not even the rustle of the cat. Again she knocked.

"Erica?"

She tried the knob, turning it. The door swung open. The interior was black as pitch. A familiar odor.

"Close the door and lock it."

He stood against the wall alongside the door, His arms folded and raised under his cloak, His eyes like two small fires. The smell of sulphur burned faintly in her nostrils as she did as He ordered. He lit a candle, then a second one, placing them on either side of the table, revealing it littered with tarot cards. Taking a chair, He gestured for her to take one opposite. In the soft, gentle glow of the candles, He appeared more menacing, more awe-inspiring than she had ever seen Him before. Or was it her worry over what she knew was coming? From inside His cloak He produced a folded newspaper, laying it on the table before her.

"Open it."

### "SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUND DEATH OF LOCAL PHYSICIAN"

The headline was followed by an article that carried to the bottom of the page and was continued on page three.

"Dr. John Settle," she said quietly.

"Read it. No, why bother. I'm sure you know all about it. You know it better than the reporter, don't you! You ought to, you're the 'unknown person who plunged the knife into the doctor's stomach killing him'!"

"You're wrong, I didn't do it."

"I say you did. Out of bitterness over what passed between you two the night he sent the girl off. Look me in the eye, Lavinia. Tell me again you didn't do it."

"I didn't! It doesn't make sense. I disliked him, yes."

"You hated him!"

"Not enough to murder him." Relief and elation swept over her. One thing was clear. One of the few aspects of the whole affair she had assumed Settle had

told her the truth about was his claim that he had consulted Ledion before asking her for the five thousand dollars. Had gotten His blessing to do so. Obviously Settle had never gone near Him! Now that she thought about it in earnest, why should he? It was out-and-out blackmail, Ledion might disapprove. Ledion liked him, sympathized with him, but it was highly unlikely He'd countenance his blackmailing her. No, the idea had to be all Settle's own.

"Curious. When you lie, your cheeks never redden like most people's."

"For the last time, I didn't kill him and I have no idea who did!"

"The happy news doesn't seem to surprise you."

"It's a surprise; how could it be anything but if I didn't know about it? Which I didn't. What do you expect me to do, jump up and down?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"This is the first I've heard of it."

He stared at her an interminably long time without speaking, His eyes searching hers, probing, pulling away at the web of her mind. Then He turned the newspaper over, concealing the headline. Assuming the meeting was ended, Lavinia started up from her chair.

"Sit down. I think you're lying. I'm certain of it, I have an instinct for these things. But whether you killed him or you didn't, I think it only fair to warn you that all your precious plans may be on the verge of collapse."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. The girl, sending her back. I have heard something you'll find very interesting, fascinating."

"Oh?"

"She's coming back."

Lavinia managed a smile and shook her head. "Not with Settle dead she's not. There's no way."

"Now you're being stupid. You're forgetting there are two ends to the stick. She's at the other end, her

body here. She doesn't need John to *bring* her back, not if she can find someone to *send* her."

"Impossible, who would help her, nobody!"

"Somebody. A witch, a very able and intelligent witch, a woman with more knowledge and experience and power in the arts than you and John Settle combined. She has every intention of sending her back."

"How do you know this?"

"Is there anything I should know that I don't?"

"I can't believe it's true. One witch would never interfere with the work of another, certainly not for an outsider. You know better than I that is a law among us as old as Hathor. Every witch in every age knows and observes it."

"What is any law, Lavinia? A rule agreed upon, made to be broken if there's something to be gained."

"What could she possibly gain?"

"New blood, the girl herself and her firstborn child." Lavinia blanched and began biting her lip nervously. "You do well to be concerned."

"When does she intend to do it?"

Ledion shrugged and turned away. He suddenly seemed to lose interest in the conversation, as if having told her the news and seen her reaction to it. He no longer had any interest in discussing it. Reaching out, she seized His wrist, but He pulled free.

"You can stop it, you can!"

"Would you want me to?"

"This whole business was your idea in the first place. I would think you'd be vexed, displeased."

"I would be," He tapped the newspaper with His finger, "but for this."

"I had no part in that, I've told you and told you!"

"You can tell me ten thousand times, you can take an oath in blood at the foot of the image of the Mother Goddess and before the Horned God himself, I still think you're lying."

"Then you refuse to help me."

"You're on your own."

"Good enough."

"Is it? It's not over yet."

"It's over the instant she dies, not retroincarnated, but dead, a corpse crumbling to dust."

"You're ready for that? He's ready to accept you?"

"He is."

"You killed Asaban, to castrate him, to make a love potion."

"It was necessary."

"You stop at nothing, do you?"

"If the path I'm on is too twisted for your liking, I would remind you that it was you yourself started me down it."

"John was right, you are an ingrate, a sizable one. Go ahead, destroy her, burn her body. You think he's ready for you. Get it over with."

"I'm sorry. I—" She sighed and lowered her eyes to the tabletop, settling on one of the cards, the Enchantress, her hands firmly gripping the lion's jaws, pulling them apart, her face benign, a portrait of self-possession, confidence. His finger went to the card.

"La Force, the queen of charmers, the irresistible female. All men fear her, her energies, her secrets. Do you fancy yourself the Enchantress, Lavinia? Does your man find you irresistible?"

"I don't know."

He glared mockingly. "You're being modest. It doesn't suit you."

"I said I was sorry. I am."

"I heard. Sorry for what? Be specific. There are so many things. Shooting Asaban without consulting me first. Of course you knew I'd forbid it. Murdering John, attempting to deceive me about it. You're amazing, you know that? Not just as a liar, but you possess such a unique talent for disaster. I set you on the right track, then what do you do? You begin running amok."

"I panicked."



"You—panic?" He threw up His hands and shook His head vigorously. "Lavinia, you are the coolest female I have ever seen. You wouldn't lower yourself to panic, with the world coming down around your ears. No, your problem is you can't resist taking matters into your own hands. You just have to do it your own way, your vanity insists on it."

"That's not so, it's not that way at all."

"Then what way is it?"

She covered her eyes with both hands and talked to the floor, her voice heavy with sadness.

"You just don't understand. My life has been so empty, such a complete vacuum, so much promise of wealth and position and happiness, love, everything, and none of it coming to me. Nothing!"

"This would have brought it all to you if you'd had sense enough to let matters take their course. There was no need for love potions, for alienating John, for murdering him."

"That was an accident."

"I'm sure."

"It was, I swear it was!"

"You reach for the lie so easily, Lavinia. And you do it with such flair and total lack of conscience. As I say, others' cheeks get red, their eyes betray them, they become nervous, not you. You just open your lovely mouth and out it comes like the sweet breath of a baby."

"Why should I kill him deliberately? What would it gain me?"

"For one thing it would do away with the possibility of his crossing you and bringing her back."

"He would never do such a thing. I paid him, I satisfied his every demand, except the last."

"Go on."

"He asked me to come down to Westerly. No explanation, just please come as soon as you can. For what do you suppose? Master, I wasn't in his office thirty sec-

onds before he attacked me. He didn't even take time to lock the door!"

"He raped you?"

"He tried. Ledion, I swear he did! I was furious, livid! To think I'd come all the way down as a favor to be treated like a common streetwalker! I saw red, I couldn't help it. There was a tray on his examination table, scalpels and things. I grabbed one to threaten him, we struggled, my hand slipped."

"And suddenly, to your horror, he was dead."

"That's exactly what happened."

"So Erica told me, almost word for word. You two are to be commended on getting your stories to dovetail so tidily," He added mordantly.

"I haven't talked to her. I haven't even seen her in a week, more! The point is I never intended to kill him. I swear by Hathor!"

"Poor John." He sighed and stared at her. Then He shrugged. "But, what's done is done. Now you've decided to kill the girl right away."

"I must, unless you do something about this business at the other end."

"Mother Damnable, yes. I would have dealt with her, of course. We would have arrived at an agreement of sorts and she would have stepped out of the picture. Your courageous little rival would have gone on floundering about, looking for a way back."

"It's not too late, you can still stop it!"

"Why bother? Why not do it your way, get rid of her yourself? It shouldn't be difficult." He got up from the table and stood at the window, looking down into the street. A ship hooted plaintively in the distance, a mournful sound carrying across the water. "Of course, who can say what might happen then? Any one of a number of things. You kill her and claim him, and within a week you lose him."

"What are you talking about?"

"You lost his father, you could just as easily lose

him. Accidents do happen, particularly in a shipyard."

As if the door at her back had been flung wide and the chill night air had come rushing in striking the nape of her neck and spreading down her spine, it dawned on her, the grisly realization that Gray's fatal accident had been no accident after all. Sensing her eyes burning into His back, He turned slowly to face her.

She leveled a finger at him, rising slowly. "It was you! You killed Gray!"

The tone of His laugh in response was brittle, affected, wholly false.

"Ridiculous," He said stonily. "I've never heard such absolute idiocy."

"You killed him and you'd kill Ross! You'd kill anybody who comes between you and me."

"Lavinia!"

"You're as jealous as a lovesick schoolboy! Of course, how could I have been so blind? You're green with envy, the great Ledion, the Master, Majesty to us all!"

"If I didn't know you better I'd think you'd suddenly taken leave of your senses."

"Have I?" Gripping the top of her dress with both hands, she ripped it away, exposing her breasts. "Take me, Ledion! Pull me under you, drive it into me. Rape me, rip me! Prove I'm right, prove it!"

His body jerked as if wrenched by unseen hands. His eyes became immense and He lurched forward, coming at her, growling like an animal, flinging aside the table in His way, sending it crashing against the wall. Tearing her dress from her completely, He threw it to one side. His hands were like ice fondling her breasts, moving down to her lower body as she dropped to her knees and fell back, spreading her legs, screaming loudly.

"Ledion, Ledion, Ledion, Ledion, Ledion!"

## XVI

In His rage He began to ravage her as no woman had ever been ravaged, with a relentless brutality, as if to discipline her for stripping the protective cover from His feelings. But strangely, as it went on, He became less savage. It was almost as if her willingness to submit seemed to mollify Him. Gradually he became gentler, His lust giving way to a tenderness she never would have imagined Him capable of.

Presently He was done with her and she picked herself up. Going to Erica's closet, she took out one of her dresses, slipping it over her bruised body, straightening her hair and composing herself as best she was able.

"Are you all right?" He asked in a solicitous tone.

She could have laughed in His face. In His eagerness to assault her, in her own haste to permit Him to prove her argument, He had nearly broken her back. Had she been unused to Him, ill-prepared or less able to cope with His strength and His vulpine ferocity she might have been severely injured but now, now that it was over here He was expressing His concern over her!

She ignored the question. Erica, she thought, had been wrong on one minor point, a point raised in their conversation as they had made their way back through the woods coming from the sabat. "Ledion is very fond of you," she had said at the time. A slight understatement. He obviously adored her, He was obsessed with her, utterly and completely. Behind the mask, behind His blazing eyes His brilliant mind hungered for possession of her. It was more than jealousy, it was a resentment so powerful, a passion so ravenous He could not even bear the thought of sharing her with a Gray, a Ross or any other man.

"So you're getting rid of the girl," He said, obviously making conversation.

"There's nothing to be gained by waiting any longer."

"How will you do it?"

"There must be a hundred different ways, but I've put a lot of thought to it and it seems to me that walking in and smothering her or putting a needle into her won't do at all."

"You'd prefer something that will provide you a little more enjoyment?"

"I'd prefer something that will provide me an alibi. I can't kill her, walk out, have them discover her dead and me be remembered as the last one to visit her. I might as well kill her in the middle of the public market. I thought if I could hit upon a way that would allow me to leave, let time pass, let the doctor or Ross or anyone else see her alive, then have her die. If such a thing were possible, anyone who followed me in would be my alibi. There's a single lamp over the head of the bed. I was thinking I could cut an inch off the bottom of a candle, hollow it out, and place it inside the glass around the flame. I'd leave, the flame would continue burning, I'd make certain the nurse looked in and saw it; then, in five or ten minutes, whatever it takes, the wax would melt down and snuff out the flame.

"The trouble is it would seal off the gas jet, too. The idea is good, it gives me the few minutes I'd need. The nurse looks in and sees the flame. She'd be my alibi, you see. But wax is no good."

"There has to be something else you could use." He thought a moment. "Go get half a cup of water."

"What for?"

"Just do it." She came back from the kitchen moments later. "Light that jet." He pointed at the wall beside the door. Lifting the lamp glass, she ignited the jet with her fingertip, turning the flame down to an inch in height. He made a loose fist with His left hand, His fingertips curling over, barely touching His palm and

placing the thumb of His other hand so as to close the hollow at the bottom, held His fist up to her. "Pour the water in. Fill it."

She did so. He mumbled something, jerking His fist toward him. There was a sharp crack, like the snapping of a blanket. He opened His fingers slowly. Lying in His palm was a stick of ice almost three inches long.

"Set it crosswise inside the top of the glass over the flame."

They watched. The ice could not be seen through the clouded, ornamental glass surrounding the jet, nor could the dripping be heard over the sound of the hissing gas. The flame burned steadily, then began to flicker as drop after drop fell down upon it. Seconds passed, a minute, two minutes. Suddenly it sputtered and died and a soft clinking sound followed as the ice broke in the center, the two pieces falling down inside.

"Perfect!" she exclaimed. "Perfect!"

"But does it give you time enough?"

"That won't be any problem. I'll just sit by the bed until I hear the nurse coming down the hall. I'll set the ice in place, say hello and good-bye to her and leave!"

"It may not be that simple. What if, after you leave, she stays too long and the water puts out the flame while she's still in the room? She'd look inside the lamp, see the two pieces of ice and the next thing you know you'll be standing in a courtroom charged with attempted murder."

"She won't stay, they never do on night rounds. Too few nurses on duty, too many patients to look in on."

"Do you think there'll be enough gas out of the one jet to kill her?"

"The nurse comes around every hour. The room is very small, tiny. There should be enough to kill a horse. What's good about it is when they do come in, they'll smell the gas and see she's dead right away. They can't help but assume it's accidental. And there'll be no

waiting until Craven or one of the other doctors comes around in the morning and finds her dead."

"If you have as long as an hour, the ice will be completely melted. And no trace of water on or around the jet."

"I tell you it's perfect. It couldn't be better!"

"Can you get any ice?"

"There's an icehouse behind the stable. I'll make two or three sticks, wrap them in something to keep them from melting. I'll do it tomorrow night, get it done once and for all!"

"Not tomorrow. Tomorrow is the night of the tenth full moon, the night the pit opens and the Father Above sees the Father Below. We have a Black Mass."

"I was forgetting."

"One more day can't make any difference."

He left minutes later, in a better mood, she noted, than when she'd arrived. And once again expressing a willingness to help her. She righted the table and straightened up the place. He hadn't admitted responsibility for Gray's death, but He didn't have to. She was convinced He'd done it. Given strong enough motive, He'd stop at nothing to further His ends. One thing was certain, if she didn't do something, Ross would also die. She couldn't have cared less about Gray, but Ross was a different matter entirely.

There was only one way to deal with the problem. Ledion must die.

**BOOK FOUR**  
**LONDON AND PROVIDENCE**



## I

There had been a prison at Marshalsea since the year 1327, although the present structure with that name had not been established until nearly 50 years later. Wat Tyler's mob had attempted to burn it down in 1381, but it managed to survive this and subsequent efforts to convert it to rubble and continued to serve the interests of justice and the welfare of those who had need of protection from those who had not.

Inside the walls stood a scattering of barrack buildings set out in a rectangle. These in turn were divided into squalid little houses set back to back in pairs. Circling them was a narrow paved yard enclosed by the high walls Lisa had seen on her way to the sabat only the night before, at the time with no thought whatsoever that she might shortly be seeing them from the inside. The spikes lining the tops of all four walls thrust against the sky like spears flung by mortals in an attack upon the gods, and the whole lofty effect inspired a feeling of being buried alive.

The door clanged behind her, the sound of the bolts thrown like hammer blows to the heart as she turned to glance at the door shutting out the world—Elison, the coming sabat, her hopes for return, Simon's showing up with the magistrate's order followed by her dear brother's great lie to Marshal Tallow had put a quick end to everything. The watchman had no curiosity as to what possible motive she might have for murdering Meggo, but Tallow did. Simon was equal to the question, explaining that he had sent Meggo chasing after her in the belief that since the two were good friends, Meggo might be able to talk her into coming back. Unable to do so, she would have turned around and re-

turned to Blyth alone, had not "Netty silenced her, in order to keep her own whereabouts secret."

This had satisfied the marshal and off went Simon, promising to see her again at the trial. Escaping the rope would not be difficult. Timothy Radwell and Dr. Golightly would witness for her and the true facts would be brought to light. If all went properly, Simon himself would eventually end up in the dock.

But whether he did or not was of little importance. Getting out of Marshalsea as quickly as possible was all that immediately concerned her. A second look at the tops of the walls brought a sinking feeling to her stomach. Only a bird could get out of the place. The turnkey on the lock stopped her, the thief and the smuggler before the inner door, an iron-plated affair which, according to the smuggler, closed up a second prison consisting of cells, and a blind alley.

They were instructed to stand where they were and wait a moment and the turnkey walked off into the crowd. She looked about at the faces of the prisoners, most of whom stood by themselves lifting their faces to the sun, drinking in its warmth as if it had been cold out, when in fact it was sweltering. Perhaps, she thought, they imagined that the feel of it on their cheeks and foreheads was God touching them, sustaining an indissoluble link with them that served to preserve their morale in such sordid and depressing surroundings. Never in her life had she seen such wretched-looking people. They were either ugly or deformed, and in many instances both. All were filthy, their bodies covered with rags, their boots and shoes shabby and broken, or their feet bare. The men were unwashed and unshaven, the women straggly-haired, smudged with soot and dirt and caked with sweat, the children even dirtier and more-neglected looking. The poorest of the poor, she thought, people clinging to the skirts of existence, fighting every day of their lives to stay out of the grave for one more day.

Many appeared covered with sores and lesions, some too ill to stand, others obviously deranged, yelling at the tops of their voices at anyone who would listen or staring into space mumbling to themselves. Occasionally a fight would break out in the midst of a game of dice or in an argument. It would be quickly broken up only to resume moments later. Two older men bellowing insults at each other suddenly began smashing at one another's faces with their fists, kicking and cursing each other until both were down on the ground urged on by those drawn up in a semi-circle around them until a guard came running up brandishing a cudgel and began beating them across the shins with it. The fight stopped, the two men staggering to their feet and limping away in opposite directions.

The stink of humanity was everywhere about her, like a cloak laid over the yard, and snugged to the walls. But the smell, the sight of the prisoners, even the awful awareness of what she was being put into seemed to pale when she looked into the eyes of a small boy approaching her. In their blue depths were despondency and death. His inability to lift his feet as he walked, the air of exhaustion about him, his cheeks like chalk confirmed it; he was more dead than alive.

"Stay back you!" snapped the sailor, wagging a finger at him. "I've seen that look, he's got the dis-temper he has."

"A penny, mum."

He was within a few feet of them and still coming, his painfully thin arms raised, his hands cupped appealingly when, before she could move to stop him, the sailor raised one leg and pushed his foot against the boy's chest, knocking him over backwards.

"I told you, stay back!"

Pushing the sailor aside, she dropped to her knees beside the boy and began comforting him.

"Be ye daft?" asked the old man. "He's right, he's got the bloody plague!"

Ignoring them both, she brushed the boy's hair back from his forehead, and, getting out a shilling, put it in his hand, closing his fingers over it. Almost immediately, a black shadow fell over the two of them as the crowd closed in.

"She give him a shilling, she did!" exclaimed a woman.

At that moment the turnkey on the lock came back, breaking through the circle and helping her to her feet. He then escorted the three of them into the inner prison. One by one each was assigned a cell. At the sight of hers she sighed audibly. It was no more than six feet square, with a single barred window looking out upon the alley and the inner wall beyond. A crudely-fashioned bed covered with straw took up half the space, with wisps of straw scattered about the floor. A small stool occupied one of the remaining corners and an army of flies crawled about the walls and ceiling, buzzing in concert. The door closed behind her and the turnkey peered in.

"I'll be by in a bit. Just you sit down and relax yourself."

She did so as his face vanished from the opening in the door and she was alone. Or so she thought. There was a stirring sound under the bed and a rat the size of a small dog showed its head, its beady red eyes staring up at her evilly, its mouth unsealing itself revealing its needle teeth. Shooting to her feet, she seized the stool, hurling it, smashing its head, blood spurting out onto the floor in all directions. The body twitched, the tail flipping about, then it lay still.

Taking hold of the hem of her skirt, she picked it up by its tail and holding it gingerly at arms length, carried it to the window and flung it out into the alley. Turning from the window, she shuddered, sinking back against the wall to rest and get control of herself. Recovering the stool, she set it upright and sitting down took stock.

Elison would come, she was sure, and they would discuss the possibility of escape. How in the world she would ever get out of the inner prison, let alone through the main door or over the wall was more than she could fathom, but Mother Damnable would know a way. She must, she knew everything else.

Then would come the sabat. She would be prepared in every respect. The only thing left to learn was the Book of Shadows, which she had only just started. Perhaps the world hadn't dropped out from under her feet after all. If she could get out, it could be less than a week 'til the big day. It was all in Elison's hands now.

Outside the window she could hear birds chirping and going to it spied two thrushes walking about the pavement regaling each other with song. Then she heard it, a loud, harrowing scream, as if someone had had a knife plunged into him. Squeezing against the wall, she peered out and up the line of barracks in the direction of the sound. At the far end of the pavement stood six or seven men in guards' uniforms and one in a suit similar to that worn by Angus Bain, lace collar, silk stockings and all. Through the guards' legs she could see a prisoner lying on his back with an iron plate on his stomach. On it heavy stones had been piled and as she watched in horror another was added, prompting a scream louder than the first one, followed by a piteous groan as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

"He's did murder, too, and the governor's after him to confess it before he goes to trial." The barred opening in the door framed a turnkey's face, not the man who had brought her in, but a younger man, a sallow-looking individual in need of a shave. "You got a visitor."

His key turned in the lock and the door opened slightly. A woman twice his size, her great ugly face scarred and battered looking, the left cheek broken and badly healed, the eye above it glaring malevolently, came barging in. The turnkey disappeared and three

other women of varying sizes and ages, but all passionately ugly, dirty, and ill-clothed, closed in behind the first one.

"Welcome to Windsor Palace, ducky," said the big woman. "I'm Mrs. Grandly, I am, but you can call me Margaret." She came closer, peering at her through bloodshot eyes, the others knotting into a group behind her. "You're pretty." Her hand shot out and began rubbing Lisa's breast. "Delicious. Soft."

Lisa jerked backward. "Don't touch me!"

"Here now, is that friendly? You must be friendly, ducky, we're all good friends in here, right girls? Sit ye down, let's have a talk. Oh, forgive me bad manners do, these be the girls. The tall one's Letty, the old one with the wart there, Marion, and the other another new girl."

"New me arsehole," snapped the third woman, interrupting. "Back again's what it is!"

They all laughed and Margaret began pawing Lisa. Pushing her off angrily, she backed away, snatching up the stool and holding it before her menacingly.

"You touch me once more and I'll break your skull open. So help me!"

"Ain't she the spitfire, though!" exclaimed Margaret. "No need for that, ducky. Like I say, we're all friends. We've come calling to see what we can do to make things more comfortable for ye. Who was it ye done in, ducky, your man?"

"Nobody!"

"Tell it to the justice!" She roared laughter, the others joining in. "You want to beat the gibbet, though, take a bit o' advice from this old girl. You go to belly plea."

"I have no intention of hanging."

"I have no intention of hanging," repeated Margaret. "You'll hang all right," she said coldly, "sure as that's a stool in your hand. The only women what don't be them what's due to have a package. Be you due to have a package?"

"Get out of here, all of you!"

"If you're not, we can arrange to fix it so you can. If you're pregnant, ducky, they don't hang you. What you'll be needin' is a strong young buck to put it to ye."

"Out!" She jerked the stool back, threatening her and the woman glared and backed off.

"You got it all wrong, ducky. We're your friends. This be no way to talk and act."

"You little bitch!" shouted Letty. "You dare snoot us!"

Margaret eyed her icily. "We'll be back, milady."

"No you won't. You stay away from me, all of you. I don't need you. Turnkey!"

He came; they left muttering and he locked the door.

"Please don't let them in here again," she said quietly.

"Mrs. Grandly asked to see you. She's bitch queen around here, you know. You make friends with her, life's a sight easier. Cross her, and you'll wish they sent you to the Fleet or Newgate."

Elison appeared behind him, carrying a tick mattress and a pillow.

"Elison!"

The turnkey stepped aside as he reopened the door.

"Ten minutes is all ye get, mam. Unless ye'd be wanting to arrange for more."

She came in and Lisa took the mattress and pillow from her. Elison stood before the turnkey, hands on hips. "How much?"

"Two shillings."

She dug in her bag. "Sixpence, and let's not see your face for half an hour, thank you."

He studied the coin in his hand disappointedly and backed out, shutting and relocking the door.

"Elison, Elison, I've never been so glad to see anybody in my life!"

"A nice fix you've gotten yourself into. So the bad penny from Blyth showed up after all."

Lisa nodded sadly.

"Now, don't go getting down. We'll set things right, we'll get you out of this lovely place."

"How?"

"Ssssh, the walls have ears, child. I saw him, you know. I saw the three of you heading for Ulster Mews. That's a beautiful eye he's got himself."

"It's infected. He'll have a lot of trouble with it and soon, if he doesn't get it tended to. He could die of blood poisoning."

"That he will, I'll see to it. Much too good for him, I say."

She began searching through her bag, bringing out an apple, an orange and a small loaf of white bread, cut in half and filled with Cheshire cheese.

"You eat while we talk. But keep your voice down. I don't trust your yellow-faced friend outside."

Lisa attacked the loaf and cheese. It tasted delicious and she couldn't eat it fast enough. "How *can* I get out of here?" she asked between bites.

"Jump over the wall, of course."

"I'm serious, Elison, this wrecks everything! As if not being able to get to the sabat isn't bad enough I could die or be killed inside this pesthole! Half of these people have got the plague!"

"Half of London."

"I can't bathe, I can't even wash my face. What chance have I got? What am I to do?"

Elison got up from the edge of the bed and positioning herself at the door opening looked up and down the hall. "There's a way out, with a little help and a lot of luck."

"How?"

"Sssssh. You must keep your voice down! Whisper." She pointed down the hallway. "At the end of the barracks there's a small building." She stopped, her eyes suddenly serious.

"Well?"



"Now, what I'm about to tell you, I don't want you to get upset. This won't be any tea party. You must be prepared for a very unpleasant time."

"Will you please stop beating about the bush?"

"The building is a charnel house."

"Dead bodies?"

Elison nodded. "People die in here, they inter most of them in the burying ground out back near the wall. The others—"

"The plague victims."

"Yes, them they pile up in the charnel house and once a week they fetch in a wagon and carry them out the front door to the burial ground in Newington Butts."

Lisa gasped. "Elison, if you think for one second—"

"Just listen. The wagon comes after dark, two men. The door to the house is opened and they bring out the bodies and pile them in. When the wagon's full they cover the load with a sheet and leave. If you were able to get out of here, you could hide by the side of the building and when they start piling the bodies in the wagon, you could strip off your clothes, climb in and pretend you were dead, you see. They work by torch-light, they're usually half tipsy on sack—I mean any man would drink on a job like that—I doubt they'd notice. They'd keep piling in the corpses."

"Elison, I couldn't."

"Let me finish. Once they're loaded and they cover it over and head out for Newington Butts you could slip out on the way, by St. George's Church, maybe. It's not far, just a few doors down. I'd be waiting there with clothes. We could be back to Tilt Yard and you safe and sound in less than half an hour."

"How could I lie there like that? I'd gag and vomit and give myself away in two shakes even before we started out! Even in poor light! You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm not asking anything, I'm telling you if you want to get out of this place that's the way to do it. If you

know a better way, try it. You can't hurt my feelings."

"Just the sight of a dead body's enough to give me the shivers."

"Then forget it."

"I'd be sick all over everything!"

"If you grit your teeth, if you breathe through your mouth to keep from smelling—"

"What do you think my chances would be?"

"That depends. If there's no moon, if you get in and lie there still as stone. If you can keep your supper on your stomach. And if you can get out by the church without upsetting the wagon—"

"There's no other way, is there?"

"None I can think of. Nor ever heard of, other than getting out feet first."

"Or pretending feet first." She pondered a moment. Just the thought of it was already making her sick to her stomach. "All right," she said in a quietly desperate voice. "I'll try."

"It's got to be more than a try, child. You've got to play your part better by far than any of those actresses in *The Beggars' Bush*. If you give yourself away it'll be all up. You're in here accused of murder. Getting caught trying to escape would be as good as a written confession."

"I realize that."

"There's something else you'll need to work out. You may have to bribe one of the turnkeys to open your door. These rooms are locked up at sunset and stay locked 'til dawn. Once outside you shouldn't have any trouble finding the charnel house, the stink'll lead you to it directly. And you should be able to wait 'til the wagon's half full and slip yourself into it."

"Why must I be inside the pile? Crawling on top will be horrible enough!"

"You've got to hide yourself. What if they stop and take off the cover for some reason? They'd spot you in a second."

Lisa shuddered. "About the turnkey, you think I can trust one not to go running to the captain of the guard?"

"That's what I was getting at. They're not a very trustworthy sort, not like witches."

"What can I do?"

"Slip one of them a fiver. Which one is for you to decide." Reaching into her bag, she took out a five-pound note, handing it to her. "Cross your fingers and hope you pick an honest one, at least one with a grain of sympathy in his heart."

"If I make it, the first thing I'll want back at Tilt Yard will be a bath. I'll scrub myself raw head to foot!"

"It'll work out, I'm sure of it. I feel it in my bones."

"When will the wagon come?"

"Day after tomorrow, around ten o'clock at night."

"Around?"

"I'll find out the exact time. I'll be by tomorrow and the next day. We must get all the preparations down pat."

"You'll be at the church."

"You can depend on it. Now, between now and then you can do yourself some good by keeping up your studies." Taking out a number of loose pages, she thrust them into her hands. "The first half of the *Book of Shadows*. You're to memorize every word and as you get each page down, you must destroy it. Tear them into tiny bits and cram them into the cracks in the floor and the walls. On second thought, they'd better be burnt. When I come back tomorrow with the other half you'll have memorized these, you can give them back to me and I'll burn them. It's going to be an awful amount of work crammed into a short time."

"I can do it. I'm a quick study."

"Take care that nobody, I mean nobody, sees them. It could go very hard for you, with us as well as with outsiders, if anyone identified you with the craft. You can't be too careful."

"I understand."

"When you're not studying, I suggest you prepare your mind for the wagon, keep telling yourself what's at stake and regardless of how distasteful it's going to be it has to be done. That will help."

Getting up, she went to the window, looking out on the pavement. "One thing, you'll have plenty of time on your hands. They pretty much leave you alone here."

Lisa told her about her four earlier visitors and how she had ordered them out. This news disturbed Elison.

"I've heard about Margaret Grandly. She's a bad egg. Give her as wide a berth as you can. She can't do you any good and she can get you in a lot of trouble."

"Time, ladies." The turnkey stood outside the door. Turning from the window, Elison patted her on the cheek affectionately. "Keep your smile. I'll be by tomorrow. Is there anything you'd like me to bring you?"

"Just yourself," said Lisa. "You're better for me than anything I can think of."

## II

It clouded over late in the day, the wind bustling and bullying down from the north, swinging about the chimney pots, skinning dust from the streets and pavements and whirling it about, hammering shutters and signs and threatening a storm.

She downed a meager supper of salt herring, black bread and tepid water and stood by the window watching the flickering candles in the windows nearby and the single lantern glowing feebly, swinging from its hook at the corner of the building by the small door leading to the outside yard. Even inside, confined as she was at the opposite end of the pavement, she could almost smell the charnel house.

Could she get out without breaking down and giving herself away? It really wasn't a question of "Could she?"; it was "Toss back your shoulders, stick out your chin and do it!"

The clouds grew angrier looking, picking up speed and careening down the sky like fat black sheep running to pasture. Big drops of rain began splattering the stone below the window sending puffs of dust upward until the pavement became drenched and glistening. The rain speedily became heavier, pounding down upon the roof of the building and the grounds surrounding, dimming view of everything visible from the window. Now and again the wind would change direction and a bucket of rain would come swishing in prompting her to wedge the stool against the bars, to keep the floor from becoming inundated.

What if it kept up? What if it rained like this the night after next? A night without moon or stars would be ideal, but a tempest like this one could raise all sorts

of problems. The men with the wagon would probably be delayed in arriving, she'd have to stand waiting in the downpour, risking pneumonia, the corpses—sickening enough dry—would be absolutely revolting soaking wet. Lying in among them naked she'd surely shiver like a spring, her teeth chattering so loudly would give her away. The sheet over her getting wet through wouldn't help any.

God in heaven, she wished she was out of this place! Wished the whole loathsome affair were over and done with; the sabat and the rest of it!

What if she didn't make it? What if something happened, something neither she nor Elison could anticipate going wrong and they caught her? Who knows how closely the two men examined their grisly load? Before throwing the sheet over it, they might very well take time to count the corpses. Or what if once outside she found herself unable to extricate herself from the tangle of arms and legs? Certainly all the bodies would be stiff with rigor mortis. She could have the devil's own time of it!

The devil. The Devil, from now on. It was all so fantastic, so incredible. Less than two months ago she had been sitting in Mansfield in 1850 as contented as a child, looking forward to marrying Ross and picking up and sailing to the great New World. If anything, life had been dull as dust, until the happy day, the wedding, Mizen Head, the *Olympia*, New York, Providence—and Lavinia.

What an amazing creature! Not so much for what she'd done to her, but for her cleverness in concealing her motives. She had taken her in as easily as a charlatan takes in a gullible schoolgirl. Taken in the two of them, actually, her and Ross.

What, she wondered, had he found out about Lavinia since she had awakened in Janet Stiles's body? Anything? Did he suspect her in the least? Was he doing anything? Was there anything he could do? Probably

not. By nature he was a very trusting individual, with no gift for peering behind people's masks, no talent for recognizing artfully disguised duplicity in a person's character. He was too good a person himself. For some unfathomable reason most decent people were unable to identify corruption in others. Such people just can't seem to make themselves believe that others can be as genuinely evil as Simon Stiles, Angus Bain, or even Margaret Grandly and her friends.

Ross should have a little of Cyrus in him, she thought. She herself should. She might not be where she was now if she had.

The storm raised itself to full fury, the rain thrashing the city and the prison with a vengeance. She fell asleep to the roar of thunder, the relentless hammering against the roof slates and occasional flashes of lightning spilling through the bars and bathing the wall and floor in an eerie glow. The next morning the storm was still at it, the rain falling so heavily that no prisoners were let out into the yard and even the turnkeys and guards hung about inside.

### III

Ross straightened up from the drafting table and turned to see Tom Overstreet filling the doorway, pipe in hand, a generous smile warming his features.

"We have a visitor!"

The office was an untidy collection of stools and drafting boards, a stove, a rolltop desk in need of one new leg—the missing one temporarily replaced by a wooden box set upright—surrounded by bare walls and salt-stained windows looking out upon the yard.

"That's all I need," said Ross in an unimpressed tone.

"Come take a look."

Going to the door, Ross saw the men lining up on either side forming a narrow way, waving hats and hands and raising their voices in greeting as a gig came rolling across the yard in the direction of the office. High on the seat next to Thursby at the reins sat Cyrus, a shawl about his shoulders, a beaver hat perched on his head, his face battling to hold back a grin of appreciation at the spontaneous reaction inspired by his appearance.

"Shall we declare it a holiday?" asked Tom. "This only happens once a year."

"What's it all about, I wonder?"

"I thought you'd know. Roll down your sleeves and tighten your tie, the king has arrived." Tom moved to leave, but Ross stopped him.

"Stick with me."

"It's you he wants to see, not me."

"Coward!"

Thursby pulled up just outside the door and getting down helped Cyrus down in turn, the old man half fighting him off, clearly determined to climb down with-



out any help. Mounting the steps with the aid of his stick, he turned to the crowd and waved.

"All right, boys, show's over. Get back to it!"

A wave of laughter rose from the gathering and even Thursby managed a smile. Starting up the steps behind Cyrus, he hesitated. Cyrus jerked his stick at him and made a face.

"Come along, man, what you've got to say is important!"

Ross and Tom exchanged mystified looks, Tom greeted Cyrus in passing and the two arrivals came into the office, Cyrus taking a chair and Thursby positioning himself awkwardly by the door, like a self-conscious palace guard assuming his duty.

"Well, well, well," began Ross.

"Well, well your hat!"

"I'm just surprised to see you, that's all."

"Disappointed's more like it. Now you've got to drop everything, stop giving orders and start taking 'em!"

"I've got a surprise for you, your brainchild—"

"Not now. Thursby, close the door and see it stays that way. I don't want anybody interrupting us. This is family business and it's nobody else's business."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll talk work in a bit, Ross. Right now you're to listen to me. I'll get right to the meat of it. I told you before I don't trust your dear sainted Aunt Lavinia."

"Is that what you've come all the way down here for?"

"Just shut your mouth and listen! Hold it shut with your hands if you have to, just don't interrupt. You were there last night when she gave out that cock and bull story about having to go and visit some fool friend o' hers who's going to have a baby."

"Jane Coward."

"That's the name. Go ahead, tell him, Thursby. Don't leave out anything."

The situation was raising color in Thursby's cheeks,

but seeing no alternative to following orders, he began. "At Mr. Cyrus' suggestion I took the liberty of following Miss Lavinia to her destination."

"You what?"

"You heard him!" barked Cyrus. "He followed her and found out just what I've been suspecting all along. The woman's a goddamned liar! Tell him, Thursby!"

"Upon arriving at the house, I checked the names of the tenants on the post boxes inside the front door. I'm afraid that no one by the name of Jane Coward lives in that building."

"What did I tell you!" rasped Cyrus, his eyes gleaming in triumph. "A goddamned bald-faced lie. What's more, he saw her come out of there looking like the wrath of God about an hour later and get this, she was wearing a whole different dress! Now you go ahead and explain that to me!"

Ross sighed and smiled. "I can't explain it, I don't have any desire to. I can't see that it's important enough to even discuss. What, may I ask, has all this to do with the price of codfish? What does it have to do with us, with Lisa?"

"You son of a bitch, you are blind as a bat! She's been lying to us through her teeth sixteen ways from breakfast. Why? I'll tell you why."

"I'm sure you will."

"Because she's been hiding something, and the something she's hiding is her part, the biggest part of all, in all this that's happened to your little girl! I don't mean happened, I mean that sweet-talking overly-refined bitch caused to happen!"

"I may be stupid, but I fail to see how you can connect this Jane Coward and a change of dresses with Lisa."

"It's the lying I'm connecting, damn it all!" Slamming his stick to the floor he glowered, his lower lip trembling visibly. "What is the woman hiding?"

"All right, let's examine the thing. So she lied about

seeing this pregnant friend of hers. Okay, maybe she didn't want us to know where she was really going, who she was really seeing. Maybe it would have been embarrassing to her. Maybe she's got herself a new beau."

"Horse manure!"

"Maybe she has. As far as her changing her dress, maybe she had an accident, spilled something on the other one or ripped it. In which case she couldn't wear it. She'd have to leave it behind."

"You got all the answers, don't you?"

"No, I don't! But from what I can see you haven't got a suspicious leg to stand on. You said last time this came up you'd find something of substance, something we could nail her with. I said then and I say now, you find it and I'll listen."

"Thursby!"

"Sir?"

"Open the door. Let's get out of here. No sense talking to a mule as stubborn as this one."

"Cyrus?"

"Forget it, I'm sorry I bothered you. You like the way this rotten business is going, I'll just stay out of it from here on in. You like her, you trust her, you stick by her. She's all yours!"

"Don't you want to see the work?"

"Not interested. I'm not in the mood. Good-bye and good luck to you. You'll goddamned well need good luck!"

## IV

Lavinia went into the woods early in the afternoon and searching about for destroying angels managed to find enough to fill a small paper sack. Securing a garlic squeezer from the kitchen, she locked herself in her room and set about squeezing the pale white caps and scaly stems, managing to half fill a cup with the deadly poisonous juice. This accomplished, she carefully washed the garlic squeezer and returned it to the kitchen, at the same time availing herself of a handful of dried corn and a small knife. She went out through the rose garden gate, looking into the trees until she found what she needed: a gray squirrel scurrying about industriously searching for acorns. Luring it to her with the corn, she watched it begin filling its cheeks, then grabbing hold of it she twisted her hands sharply, snapping its neck, killing it instantly. Cutting open the carotid artery, she then proceeded to bleed the creature, bringing the level of clear liquid in the cup up close to the lip and altering its color to bright red.

During the Black Mass scheduled for that evening, Ledion would stand at the altar directing the ceremony. At one point He would turn his back on the gathering and lifting a cup filled with blood taken from the body of a dead infant, pray aloud to Lucifer and drink from the cup in emulation of a priest tasting the blood of Christ. Before the Mass was begun she would steal behind the altar and substitute the contents of her cup for the blood in Ledion's.

Upon leaving Erica's and returning home the night previous, she had lain awake for hours trying to figure out the best way to dispose of Him. He was invulnerable to fire, and drowning was out of the question. A

knife or a gun would serve, but neither could be used with any subtlety, certainly not in the midst of the Mass. Then too, killing Asaban had only increased her dislike of firearms. Poison was the answer.

She had no way of obtaining arsenic or strychnine and no particular desire to take Erica or anyone else into her confidence in hopes of persuading them to help, so a natural poison looked to be the best possibility. The woods around Blackwood were filled with all sorts of poisoned mushrooms, toadstools and fungi—the ugly common stinkhorn, delicate bell-shaped *panaeolus* and its butterfly cousin, an impressive variety of *Russulas*, and more. But it was the Destroying Angel she decided on. The name itself had always intrigued her and the deadliness of its poison was proven beyond doubt.

With Ledion dead and Lisa following Him into eternity within twenty-four hours, the situation would be bound up in a neat little package, with no more holes, no more loose ends. And her troubles, like Lisa's, would be over.

She left the house shortly after dinner, without telling anyone, heading straight for the church. Lightning splintered the dark sky, envious thunder growled restlessly and the rain arrived, angling downward through the woods in crystal sheets, silvering the trunks of the maples, slapping the few leaves still clinging to their branches, loosening their grip, sending them sailing earthward. The storm had arrived with such suddenness, striking with such ferocity, the ground quickly became soggy underfoot, slowing her pace as she headed down the path. Under her cloak, she carried the cup, having taken the precaution of covering it with paper secured around the lip with a rubber band.

In one respect, the obvious one, she would miss Ledion, but His presence in the world she was busily constructing posed a genuine threat. Permitting him to continue living would only invite disaster.

Mody mewed plaintively at her heels, upset by the

downpour and uncomfortable. Stooping, she picked him up, slipping him inside the front of her cloak with his head partially exposed. The unexpected bad weather did not bother her. She was too excited, too preoccupied with thoughts of bringing matters to a favorable conclusion.

"Mody, in this life if one has the courage to do what has to be done, things always work out beautifully!"

One thing above all else she could be thankful for, exposing Ledion. Casting Him in a new light showed Him as far more dangerous than Settle or Cyrus or any of the others could ever have been. Did He suspect she might try to kill Him? Only if His conceit allowed Him to. She doubted it would. His vanity was monumental, He'd even come right out and said that nothing or no one living or dead could equal His intelligence, His powers, His anything.

Let Him suspect her. He'd be so busy this night conducting the Mass, He'd never be able to watch her. And He'd never dream she'd strike in the very midst of the ceremony, in front of all the faithful.

The vague outline of the church steeple revealed itself against the sky. No lights could be seen, but intuition told her that the others, at least some, had already arrived. The altar would have been set up earlier, the crucifix hanging upside down in the rear, the altar itself draped in black, with black candles and every device, every means for mocking the Christ and religion prepared for presentation.

Reaching the church just as a flash of lightning opened the sky, casting its momentary blue-white light over the area, she made her way down the side of the building to a door near the rear corner. Going inside, she found herself in a small paneled room devoid of furnishings, and directly in front of her three steps leading up to the door opening onto the altar. She started up the steps and was reaching for the knob, preparing to ease the door open to make certain the coast was

clear when Mody—still resting on her left arm under the protection of her cloak—suddenly started, arching his back, hissing loudly and leaping out. In doing so, one paw found the paper cover tautly drawn across the mouth of the cup in her right hand, ripping it and dislodging it from her grasp. Down it fell, striking the top step, spilling its contents, sending a red stream cascading down to the floor.

Cursing, she kicked at Mody, but he jumped aside easily, bounding down the steps to the floor where he swung about, red-eying her in obvious annoyance.

“Bastard cat! I could wring your neck!”

Getting control of herself, and picking up the empty cup, she opened the outer door and threw it out into the brush. Then tearing up a handful of weeds, she wiped off the steps.

The furry wretch! This was the thanks she got for shielding him from the rain, carrying him two-thirds of the way from the house! Oh well, Ledion could wait, for a time at least. Lisa was of much more immediate importance. Once she was out of the way, He could be brought to Erica’s on some pretense and done away with. Poisoned, stabbed, shot, what difference did it make?

Ignoring Mody and retracing her steps down the side of the church, she went in the front door, joining the other early arrivals, all of whom were seated on the floor which had been swept clean since last she’d seen it. Within fifteen minutes nearly a hundred witches and warlocks had congregated. Erica came in alone as usual, sitting on the floor on the opposite side, looking around. Lavinia pretended not to see her. She could do without her company, without her endless questions and unsolicited advice. Erica was one of that great company of people whose friendship one needed only when one needs a favor or a sympathetic ear. At any other time, such friends were all pests and bores.

A hush fell over the crowd as Ledion entered, fol-

lowed by a warlock who would be acting as His lector. The Master was dressed entirely in red—chasuble, amice, alb, even His cincture about His waist. The instant He appeared, the congregation began singing the entrance hymn, an obscene parody of the actual hymn sung when a parish priest came into the church to celebrate a typical Low Mass.

Sitting behind the altar, Ledion looked over His congregation as the lector moved into the wings. Then He returned with a pretty young girl wearing a black gown. Kneeling, He lifted it from her body, revealing her completely naked. Then she lay down on her back on the table in front of Ledion. Immediately, the entire congregation rose as one and disrobed completely.

A parody of the Introit verse was chanted, the lector leading the congregation and this completed, Ledion stood up.

"Satan be with you. And with thy spirit. Let us pray. Almighty Satan, Lord of hosts, of the Shadows, of Life, and the giver of life. All-knowing Expositor of Death, open wide we pray thee the gates of Hell through which all must pass. Let thee, oh Master of Masters, show us the pit and prepare us for the Sublime Ordeal of Fire in which all will become one with thee. We will enter thy realms gladly and without fear. For we know that when rested and refreshed amongst the Blessed Demons, the Destroyers, the Ardennies of Him who would rule alone amongst the Great Under Spirits, the Maleficent Ones, Rulers of Darkness all, we will be reborn again by thy grace and the grace of the Great Mother. Descend, we beseech thee, on thy servant and priest."

Attention then turned to the living altar, Ledion lifting His robes, mounting her and copulating in rhythm to the chanting of the crowd. In the midst of the act she began wrenching her head back and forth and screaming his name, and: "Master, help us, help us all!"

Dismounting her, bending, He kissed her body, desecrating the host over her private parts, into which a



small portion of the host was inserted. A chalice was produced containing black aspergillum in liquid and with it He carefully washed her genital areas.

By now the entire altar had taken on an eerie presence, illuminated as it was by the two black candles only positioned at the girl's feet and by her head. Ledion was in His glory, His deep voice rising, thundering, ringing against the walls.

"Unholy, Unholy, Unholy, Lord Satan of Fire!"

Every phase of the Mass, every detail was performed, every prayer recited, and all of them distorted, corrupted and otherwise rendered obscene. Ledion, His lector and all present crossed themselves backwards again and again until the bleating of a goat in the wings signaled the Communion ceremony wherein Master and members would partake of the body and blood of Satan. One by one, the celebrants approached the living altar to kiss it and receive and desecrate the bread and wine. This was accompanied by continued chanting and hymn-singing led by the lector.

Following Communion, the lector lit the Candle of the Damned, placing it upon the naked girl's navel, the dripping wax securing it in place. Then began the recitation of the Creed.

"We who believe in one Satan, the Father Almighty, maker of hell and earth, of all things evil, visible and invisible; and him alone—Lucifer the Light, Belial the Beneficent, Samael, Sinner of Sinners, Abaddon Almighty, Mephistopheles the Magnificent through Whom all things evil, all lies, deceits and base stratagems come to existence; Who because of our salvation came up from the bottomless pit after a thousand times a thousand years, and was incarnate from His own godless image and suffered and was cast down into the lake of fire and brimstone. Father Almighty, thou wilt rise again to stand among us in glory to judge the living and the dead. Satan to Whose kingdom there will be no end, we worship and glorify thee in one unholy Demonic

Church now and forever. We confess one baptism to the greater glory of sin; we look forward to thy resurrection, and life in the Fiery Pit to come. Nema!"

"Nema! Nema! Nema! Nema! Nema! Nema! Nema!"

As sentence followed sentence the chanters' voices rose until they were joined in one great sustained hysterical roaring. At the nema a frenzy seized them and they began dancing and screaming, fondling those nearest them, warlocks laying hold of witches and copulating with them until the madness infecting them all seemed to shake the very foundation of the church. This went on until one by one they fell down exhausted. When all was quiet Ledion raised both arms and declared the dismissal.

"Go, the Mass is ended."

So mesmerized was Lavinia, so completely captivated by the utter depravity going on all about her in which she herself so willingly took part, so thrilled by the wild chanting, she became dizzy and very nearly lost consciousness.

One other observer, not among the members of the congregation, was equally impressed, although not in the same way. Sitting high in a tree behind the church, holding tightly to a slippery branch, his clothing soaked through to his skin, undetectable in the darkness, looking on through the empty rear window frame past the crucifix suspended upside down from the interior wall above it, he continued to gape, his mind unwilling to accept the actuality of the loathsome spectacle he had just witnessed.

It was the first Black Mass Thursby had ever seen.

## V

After the Black Mass she had left the church alone and searched the area for Mody, but, unable to find him, had given up and gone on home. He was not there when she had arrived. Nor was he anywhere about the next morning. Perhaps, she thought, she had seen the last of him. In a way she wouldn't regret it if she had. He'd done it deliberately, upsetting the cup and spilling the poison, no one could convince her otherwise. And after all the trouble she'd gone to preparing it. Given just ten seconds more, she would have had the cups switched and the moment Ledion reached the Communion ceremony, picked up the "blood of Satan," and drank it. He would have collapsed and died.

The way the accident had happened, the manner, and occurring as it had just as she was about to open the door made her wonder about Mody. She could almost believe that he knew exactly what she was up to and had thwarted her deliberately. To save Ledion. Still, how could he know? How could he reason it all out so capably, and recognize that it was all up to him to stop her? Had Ledion warned him to keep an eye on her? Was there direct communication between the two? She wouldn't be surprised.

Now, almost twenty-four hours had passed since Mody's disappearance and here she was hurrying up the hospital steps, in her bag two pieces of ice chipped from a straw-covered block in the icehouse behind the stables. Two cylindrically-shaped chunks were wrapped in a piece of muslin to delay their melting as long as possible. For all His deviousness, for all His jealousy and conceit, Ledion was uncommonly clever. The idea was so simple and yet so practical. The flame melts the

ice, the water douses the flame, the warmth dries up the water and the hissing culprit does the deed.

Up the steps to the heavy double doors, closed after six, but not locked, inside, padding softly down the dimly-lit entrance hall past the front desk. The nurse on duty looked up. Lavinia smiled and nodded, continuing down the hall to the stairway. Up to the second floor to come upon three nurses in heated conversation around the floor desk, one insisting the other was late coming on duty, the accused denying it, the third nurse attempting to mediate. None of the three even noticed her passing by, under the clock and on down the corridor to Lisa's room. Taking hold of the knob, she turned it.

It was locked. She glanced back up the way she had come just as two of the nurses embroiled in the discussion packed up their opinions and withdrew. The one remaining, a petite auburn-haired girl, very young and pretty in a well-scrubbed way, sat down at the desk.

"Nurse, will you come here please?" She came, half trotting down the hall, smoothing her skirt, smiling amiably. "This door is locked. Would you open it please?"

The girl's hand instinctively went to the keyring at her belt. She hesitated. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I can't."

"And why not, may I ask?"

"Orders. She's not to have any visitors."

"Whose orders?"

"Dr. Craven's, ma'am."

"Since when?"

She shrugged. "Before I came on, I guess. Rutledge told me. She was very definite."

Lavinia smiled. "I see. Well, there must be some mistake. You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm Pritchard."

"I'm Lavinia Cartwright." She extended her hand graciously and they shook hands. "The patient is my nephew's wife. I'm here every day, afternoon or eve-

ning. He, Ross her husband, that is, asked me expressly to look in on her tonight. He won't be able to make it." She paused for effect. "It's a very sad case."

"Yes, ma'am, the head nurse was telling me."

"I generally sit by her bed for an hour or so. Not that I can do anything, you understand, but being close to her, feeling her presence, so to speak, and hoping she can feel mine seems to help."

"I know what you mean, ma'am."

"We're a close-knit family and this thing's upset us terribly. All of us feel so utterly helpless. I won't stay long, I promise. I just want to sit and be with her. And pray a little. You understand."

"I understand. No visitors."

"Miss—" The *s's* hissed. "I'm asking you for the last time, open this door!"

"I can't."

"You mean you won't."

"No, ma'am. I mean yes, ma'am."

The girl was not afraid of her. Her jaw was set, her stare unwavering. "I'm afraid I'm confusing you. I'm family, you see. Immediate family, I come every day."

"Yes."

Lavinia sighed. It was useless. "Why don't I have a word with Dr. Craven?"

"He's in the operating room, ma'am. He should be out in a little bit. If you'd care to wait—"

"Why don't you just run downstairs and tell Dr. Bunning Lavinia Cartwright is here and wishes to visit Lisa Dandridge in 212. Can you remember all that?"

"Dr. Bunning's gone home. He leaves at seven every night, unless there's a late staff meeting. The nurse on the front desk can give you his home address if you like, if you want to get in touch with him."

"Never mind!" snapped Lavinia in spite of herself. It was rapidly becoming ridiculous. She might just as well have marched in carrying a bright red flag with a brass band behind her. And to suddenly make matters worse,

down the hall came Dr. Craven, as haggard-looking as usual, busily rolling down his sleeves, shaking his head at the floor.

"Dr. Craven," said the nurse, "this lady wants to visit 212 and I told her—"

"Go back to your desk, I'll see to it. Miss Cartwright—"

"Good evening, Doctor. Would you mind explaining to me what this is all about? I come down here as usual, I find the door locked."

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you, but we've decided on complete isolation."

"We?"

"Mr. Dandridge specifically asked—"

"Are you trying to tell me that Ross is barring me from seeing her?"

"Mr. Cyrus Dandridge."

"Really, Doctor, you don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"If you don't, I guess that makes me a liar. Either way the door's locked and it stays locked. No visitors."

"You mean even Ross isn't allowed in?"

"Well . . ."

"So 'no visitors' means me, right?"

"Miss Cartwright, I'm fairly well done in for the day. I'm really not up to arguing about it. All I can say is I've got my orders."

"And when did this ultimatum come down?"

"First thing this morning."

"I see. Were you given any particular reason for it? Or is it just a whim on his part?"

"Maybe you'd better ask him."

"Don't imagine I won't. Thank you, Doctor, and good night!"

## VI

The rain persisted all the next day and all through the night following. Although it kept the prisoners out of the yard, it failed to discourage Elison. Early that afternoon she reappeared, sopping wet and loudly condemning the elements, but a welcome sight to Lisa.

No sooner had the turnkey closed the door and left them in privacy than they began exchanging portions of the *Book of Shadows*. Elison then produced some more fresh fruit and oatmeal bread and goat's milk, which, though Lisa had never tasted it before, proved colorless and devoid of any recognizable flavor, but surprisingly easy on the digestion.

"I checked," whispered Elison. "The carters will be here at eleven."

"Even if it's raining pitchforks?"

She nodded. "I doubt if it'll keep up like this for another day and night. All Lambeth's flooded already, the ditches are rivers, and the ground can't take any more. Rain or shine, you be ready. Have you decided who you're going to try to bribe?"

"None of them, why take the chance?"

"Then how do you propose to get out of here?"

"I'll think of something."

"Time's getting short."

"I'll cross that bridge all right. What worries me is getting out the front door. What if they stop, or somebody stops them?"

"There's nothing you can do about that, so worrying about it isn't going to help any."

Lisa started to give her back the five-pound note. "I shan't be needing this after all."

"Keep it. It may come in handy for something else."

"Oh, Elison, Elison, I'll be so relieved to get out of this place! In a way the rain's a blessing, at least I don't have to mingle with all these poor wretches. I don't have to see that Margaret whatever-her-name-is and her friends. I'll be so glad to get back to Tilt Yard and my tub. I'll need a bath as I've never needed one before!"

"Maybe it's best you don't go back to the house. That's where he and the watchman grabbed you. You escape and it'll be the first place they'll come looking for you."

"So where shall I go?"

"Do you remember the lad with the crutches who came at us out of the shadows that night?"

"Geoffrey."

"Geoffrey Muirhouse. He and his mother live in Blue Alley close by. You'll be better off staying there. I'll see her tonight about it."

"Is she a good friend of yours?"

"Yes. And she can be trusted."

They talked on, Elison quizzing her on the material she had memorized. Presently the turnkey came back, unlocking the door and telling Elison to leave. She got up from the edge of the bed.

"I'll be back tomorrow afternoon. Keep a smile. Everything'll come out right." She patted her cheek and kissed her.

"Good-bye, Elison, thank you for coming."

"I wouldn't miss this place for the world," she said smiling and waving.

Mercifully it stopped raining the next morning and the prisoners were turned out into the yard in force. Lisa stared at the main door, deciding that it must weigh two tons and presented an even greater obstacle to escape than the towering walls. She passed the smuggler in the yard. He wanted to talk, but she thought it just as well if she avoided him. Earlier she had sympathized with him, as she had with the older man who



had come in with them, but their callousness toward the boy had been inexcusable. Besides, neither looked as if he could be trusted. Give them a pinch of encouragement and she'd probably find herself herded into a corner and raped. From the occasional scream of anguish that arose out of sight behind the inner wall it was certain that more than one helpless inmate's honor was being abused.

She did bump into the boy she'd given the money to two days before. He recognized her with a grin. If anything he had grown paler and more unhealthy-looking since last she'd seen him. How he managed to keep his feet was a mystery to her.

"How are you?" she inquired.

"All right. And you, miss?"

"The same. Hungry?" He shrugged as if he were resigned to life on an empty stomach and the weakness of body and will that accompanied such a condition. She had one of the apples given her by Elison wrapped in her kerchief. She had been saving it until noon, just in case the prison fare proved inedible, a more than likely expectation. Unwrapping it, she offered it to him.

"Thank you, but I couldn't."

"Yes, you can."

"I couldn't take your food."

"I've plenty, go ahead."

His eyes widened, his painfully thin hand darting out, all but snatching it from her. He began devouring it, as if he hadn't eaten in days, taking enormous bites, driving them down his throat without chewing. Her heart ached at the sight. What in God's name could such a pitiful and helpless creature have done to land him in this place?

"Eat it slowly, you'll choke."

He managed a smile between pieces, but continued to down it as fast as he could get it into his mouth, core and all.

"I'll get you an orange later. Would you like that?"

"Oh yes, miss, I'd fair love it."

"Don't you get anything to eat?"

"I do, but I can't seem to keep it down inside. I swallow it I do and soon as it's down my stomach turns turvy and up it comes. I don't know what ails it."

"How do you feel now?"

"All right, like maybe it'll stay put."

"It's this rotten swill they give us! I'm going to give you all my fruit. And some bread. You space it out. There'll be enough for two or three days. Maybe by that time you'll be well again."

"But what'll you eat?"

"Don't worry about me. Have you seen a doctor?"

"Oh yes. He says I'm sick."

"That's no big secret. Does he say what it is? Is there anything he can do to cure it?"

"Cure?"

"Make it better, make you feel right again?"

"He says I got the bad humors, the melancholies. He let my blood and went away. That's the last time I saw him."

"Lucky for you." Her heart went out to him, but beyond giving him all the food Elison had brought her there was obviously nothing she could do to ease his plight. Whatever his illness, Izaak Golightly would probably have been able to cure him. Purge him, give him decent food for a week, fresh air and sunshine and he'd be good as new.

Izaak, Timothy and Mansfield. And poor dear Meggo sleeping under the cowslips she'd placed on her grave. A whole different world, another planet. It all seemed a thousand years ago now she thought about it. In a way she had hated to leave there, but of course it wasn't a matter of choice. Still if there'd been no fair come to town, and no Klovka, she would have lived there and died there, never to see Ross again. At least here, as hazardous and as unpleasant as it was, she was in sight

of her goal. If she could make it out tomorrow night—

“Are you daydreaming, miss?”

“I guess I was.” She patted his cheek affectionately and he beamed. “I don’t even know your name,” she said.

“It’s Walter, Walter Fitzgibbons.”

“My, what a very impressive name for such a young man.”

“I’m not young, I’m nine years old, I am.”

Nine maybe, she thought, but there was something in his eyes and in his voice that made him seem six times that age.

“I’m Lisa.”

They shook hands. “I’m very honored to meet you, Lisa.”

“Why are you in here, Walter?”

“I didn’t do nothing.”

“What do they think you did?”

“I was with my chums in Borough High Street and James Foote snatched a loaf of wheaten bread from a stall and we ran, we all ran. I was the one got caught. I swore on my word I hadn’t stolen nothing, but they took me to the marshal and here I am. I’m to be tried in the court, I am,” he added proudly.

“Disgraceful!”

“It’s what happened, it is!”

“How long have you been here?”

“Three months come Tuesday.”

“Where are your mother and father?”

“My mother’s dead of the plague. My father came but he won’t come no more.”

“Why not?”

“He came the day after they brought me in. I told him what happened and he didn’t believe it. He called me a liar and boxed my ears and told me I could rot in here for all he cared. And off he went and that’s the last I seen of him. He’s not my real father.”

"Where is he?"

He shrugged. "Gone to Ireland in chains, last I heard."

"I see." She was tempted to tell him she would see what could be done about getting him out, but raising hopes that well might prove false seemed pointless and cruel. Then too, such an offer coming from her might not be accepted with a straight face. "Meet me after the meal right here. I'll have the fruit and bread for you." She looked about. The walls met at a corner to the extreme left of the front door. She pointed. "Suppose we make it over there. It's a bit more private."

"I'll be there."

"Good boy."

He walked away and she lost sight of him in the crowd.

"Well, well, well, now here's a grand surprise, ladies. It's her ladyship, in the flesh!"

She stiffened and turned slowly. It was Margaret Grandly and the others. She stood before her, fists on hips, fish-eying her coldly. Lisa started off, but the woman caught hold of her arm, gripping it tightly.

"Let go of me!"

"What's the big rush, Milady Bountiful? No time for a bit o' chit-chat with your bloody inferiors? Tsk, tsk, tsk."

"She's off to see the Duchess o' Marlborough. They're having tea in the garden at Hampton Court, they are," ventured the wart-faced Marion.

"I've been looking for you, milady," said Margaret. "Isn't that so, girls? I said to myself, that little lady needs help, something more than motherly advice."

"I'm really not interested. Let go of my arm, you're hurting me!"

"Perish, that I'd never do." She let go, but at once the others closed in joining her, blocking the way on all four sides. "I been worried sick over you, Milady

Bountiful," continued Margaret. "You don't seem at all concerned over the gravity of your situation, you don't. You're going up for murder!"

"I'm not concerned because I haven't killed anybody, and I can prove it."

"That's not easy to do," said Letty. "As many guiltless ones as them that do it hang. These be sorry times we live in."

Margaret nodded. "You never spoke a truer word, Let. But you'll be safe with the belly plea, darling girl. They don't hang mothers-to-be."

"Leave me alone! Go away or I'll call the guard."

Margaret bristled. A hand clapped over Lisa's mouth, both arms were suddenly pinned behind her back and all four of them began pushing her toward the inner wall door. She struggled to free herself and shout for help, but in seconds they were through the door and starting down the narrow alley within. A small knife showed in Letty's hand, the gleaming point touching her throat sending an icy chill through her shoulders. Her eyes rolled to one side. A man, the masculine image of Margaret, came shuffling out from the concealment of the barracks corner. He closed in on them, bringing a foul odor and the stink of stale ale on his breath.

"One whisper out of you, milady, and I'll empty your throat on the pavement," said Letty.

"Bernard, dear boy," said Margaret, "come meet Milady Bountiful. She's dying to make your acquaintance; she's in pressing need of your services, lad."

The others laughed and backed away to give him room, Letty continuing to hold the knife at her throat. She wanted to cry out, scream for help, but her throat was as dry as tinder, the muscles closed so tightly she could barely catch her breath. His hands took hold of her upper arms, pushing her down to her knees then over on her back. With one hand, he lifted her skirt

and shift, exposing her privates and with the other fumbled at the string of his breeches, pulling out his member, working stiffness into it. She cried out, a plaintive, feeble mewling sound that brought laughter from the women and a smile to the ugly face hovering over her.

In seconds he was down upon her, preparing to drive his member into her. There was a sharp cry by the door, a young voice.

"There, see!"

The circle about her broke quickly and there was Walter tugging at a guard's sleeve, a slope-shouldered, hard-looking young man. Raising his cudgel high, he brought it down upon her attacker's head. Margaret shrieked as he toppled over unconscious.

"Bastard, you've killed him! You've killed my darling boy!"

"I couldn't kill him with a sash weight," said the guard. "Get him up and into the block before I give you four harpies the same. Move!"

He helped her to her feet, Walter standing by looking as gravely concerned as any grown man as the women dragged the unconscious Bernard away, Margaret wailing and wringing her hands over him.

"Dearest darling boy, speak to me, speak to me! Merciful father in heaven!"

"You all right, miss?" asked the guard.

"I think so. You saved my life."

"Saved your honor. You can thank this youngster." The guard smiled and took affectionate hold of Walter's shoulder. "Stay away from that bunch."

"I've been trying to."

"If they give you any more trouble, you tell 'em Loyal Parsons'll get 'em locked up for thirty on bread and water. And maybe open their skulls into the bargain. You look to be all right. You can go back out into the yard now." He smiled and walked off the same

way Margaret and the others had gone. Lisa finished dusting herself off, straightened her hair and leaning over, kissed Walter on top of the head.

"Today, Walter Fitzgibbons, you will feast as you have never feasted before!"

## VII

A pewter-hued sky continued to overhang the world of the Marshalsea threatening to reopen at any time. True to her word, she got all that remained of the fruit and bread Elison had brought her to Walter, and, early that afternoon, Elison came in with more. They talked briefly of the rape attempt, then final plans were made for the escape.

"I'll be waiting in the shadow of the door on the church porch."

"How far is St. George's from the front door?"

"Six, seven doors. And on the same side of the street."

"How long would you guess they'll take to load up and get through and outside, twenty minutes?"

"More than that. They'll take their sweet time. If it should rain they'll be late. Either wise they'll be half-drunk and loud and stumbling about."

"And careless, I hope. Oh, Elison, I hope I can take this!"

"You? You'll take it without turning a hair. You're made of stern stuff, child. You'll make it out of here and out of time back to where you belong as easy as breath."

Lisa brought up Walter Fitzgibbons and her concern for him. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"I wish I could say yes, but unless you want to try to bring him out with you I can't think of a blessed thing. And trying it well might ruin your own chances. If he's as sick as you say, he'd never be up to it. It's a shame, Lisa, but half the children in here are as innocent as babes."



"Innocent or guilty, they don't belong in a place like this."

"Perhaps, but it's not the Marshalsea or the watchmen or the justices, it's life itself that's done it to 'em. It's a heartless business, living, with little that's decent and nothing that's fair in it. The innocent suffer with the guilty. They collect the lot in cathedrals like this one, half starve 'em, ignore 'em, punish 'em when the urge is on, and end up pretending they're dead or gone to Liverpool. The way I see it half the world is an embarrassment to the other half and for that the embarrassers must pay. There must be fifty Walter Fitzgibbonses in here, fifty more in Newgate and the Fleet and the Queen's Bench."

"If he doesn't get out of here he'll be dead in two weeks."

"If he does, he'll probably be dead in two weeks. If I seem hard-hearted, you must forgive me. It's only that what will be will be. You can't float a stone and you can't save the Walter Fitzgibbonses of this lovely world. Them that can just aren't interested. Now then, a problem's come up. I went round to Alice Muirhead's and there's plague on the door, the usual red cross with 'Lord have mercy upon us' scribbled under it. The house has been locked up by the constables and nobody's allowed in or out."

"What's to become of her and the boy?"

"Oh, she's not sitting by the window waiting to die. Knowing her, she's probably hurrying things along with some kind of quack remedy."

"She ought to know better than that, if she's a witch."

"She's not. You thought since she was a witch she'd have more sense?" Alison smiled. "She's only a friend, not a sister."

"She should be scrubbing the two of them down."

"It might be too late for that. No, she's probably very busy dosing herself and poor Geoffrey."

"With what?"

"The usual. She'll take a dram of mithridate, and dissolve it in three or four spoonfuls of dragon water."

"Dragon water?"

"Water with fire in it." She winked. "Drink it, then lay hot cloths or bricks against the soles of their feet and after that wrap the two of them up in woollen cloths so that they sweat fiercely. When the sores begin rising apply a live pigeon cut in two parts, or else a plaster made of the yolk of an egg, honey, herb of grace chipped fine as pepper, and wheat flour."

"And what's supposed to happen?"

"The sores ripen and break and after they've run a day or two she'll put a plaster of melilot over them until they heal."

"And that's a cure? You admitted to me there was no cure."

"I didn't say it was a cure, I only said it was what I think Alice will do."

"With the result they both die."

"Who can say?"

"So if I can't hide with them what do I do?"

"There's a small closet upstairs in Lucilla's room. It would be stuffy, dark as a pocket, and hot as blazes with the door closed, but you'd only have to close it if you heard them coming up the stairs."

"It doesn't sound like much of a hiding place."

"Will you let me finish?"

"But wouldn't whoever comes up see the door right off and go straight to it?"

"I was thinking, the door could be attached to the back of the armoire that stands alongside it now. Then, if anyone tried to move the armoire to look behind it they wouldn't be able to, with the door locked from the inside, that is. I'd tell them it was just too heavy to move. It might work, Lisa."

"I don't know."

"You look at the way the house is built and you'd never imagine there'd be room for a closet in that corner. It makes more sense than holing up with people you don't know. If everything goes well you wouldn't need to hide very long."

"Four days."

"Five. The ceremony will begin two nights from tonight."

"Either I make it tonight or the whole business goes down the drain."

## VIII

She had no means for telling time exactly, but at ten forty-five the bell in the steeple of St. George's clanged forth and from that point on she counted seconds until five minutes before the hour. Then, taking a deep breath, she let out a blood-curdling scream and collapsed on the floor, making sure that the stool stood within reach of both hands flung out over her head. She lay motionless as the seconds silently ticked away. Steps and the jangle of keys, a voice gasping, the key turned in the lock, the turnkey shuffling in.

"What's the trouble here?" He knelt beside her and examined first one eye then the other. To his left her hand found the stool leg, gripping it. Lifting it high, she brought it crashing down on his head and groaning loudly, he fell across her unconscious. She wriggled out from under him, filched his keys and quickly rolled him under the bed out of sight of anyone peering in the door. Then, setting the stool upright, she went out locking the door.

Down the narrow hallway she ran out into the dimly-lit alley. The sky overhead was shrouded with clouds extinguishing moon and stars. The air was damp, the night unusually still, the Marshalsea so quiet she could almost hear the flame flickering in the lantern hanging from the corner of the barracks. Edging to her right, she sneaked around the corner of the building and hugging the side made her way stealthily down to the far end. Spying the charnel house she could see that the door opened in conventional fashion, the hinges located at the right. She would have liked to take advantage of the concealment of the door once it was swung open, but it occurred to her that if the carters backed up too

closely, the open door might block her way into the wagon. Better she make her approach from the left side. For the present she would hide at the back of the building.

She waited and listened in silence, praying they wouldn't be late. She had no idea how long before the turnkey would regain consciousness. Thirty minutes? Surely no less than twenty. Once awake and on his feet, he would raise a hue and cry to lift the slates from the barracks' roof. The guards on duty would come running and the search begin. The first thing they would do would be to lock and bar both the inner and main doors. If it came to that, she might just as well put her clothes back on and give herself up.

The church bell sounded the hour and she resumed counting seconds. One minute, two, three. Then the joyous sound of the outer door being swung open, the unmistakable clopping of hooves, grinding wheels and the snap of a whip. With painful slowness, the wagon came into the inner prison and down the alley, closer and closer, arriving at last, the driver turning it about, lining the rear end up with the charnel house door she imagined.

She began undressing as the door was unlocked and opened and the two men's voices were clearly audible.

"Easy, Abijah, good boy."

"Look at him shake, Will, look at them legs! He's got pneumonia for certain!"

"Don't be daft, mon, 'tis a wee cold and nothin' more. He's had the sniffles afore. He'll live."

"He's old as Methuselah and so tired he can barely lift one hoof after the other. He should be put out to nibbling grass, poor fellow."

"Every time you get a belly full o' malt your heart gets big as your mouth. Use your brains, mon, where would we get another to pull the ladies and gentlemen?"

"John Spooner's looking to sell his mare."

"John Spooner can keep her. I would nae' gi' ye' ten

bob for that sack o' bones. She's had the strangles, and her last two foals died abornin', both blind and misshaped."

"I ain't sayin' we buy her, I'm sayin' Abijah's got too old and shaky for to work heavy like we do her!"

"He's sound o' wind and strong as a bull. Let's get on wi' it!" The door was opened.

"What a stink!"

"What do ye expect, roses and hollyhocks? Gi' a hond here."

She could smell nothing, but she could hear the loud thump as the first corpse was flung into the wagon. The horse whinnied and shifted his feet, his hooves ringing against the pavement stones. A second and a third corpse were loaded on, the wagon bed creaking loudly in protest. By now she was completely undressed, her clothes piled at her feet. Shivering, she felt the goose-flesh rise on her skin. The night had held the warmth of the day, but a breeze had come up chilling the air slightly. That and nerves and it was all she could do to keep her teeth from chattering. She began inching down the side and about ten feet from the corner the odor suddenly struck her nostrils, a sickly-sweet smell vying with that of human excrement. Gagging, she covered her mouth with one hand to keep from throwing up. Then pinching her nose, she began breathing through her mouth rhythmically, continuing on until she got to the corner. Both men were inside as she caught first sight of the wagon, a tangle of limbs and rib cages, lolling heads, gaping mouths, staring eyes and flesh studded with lesions, the unafflicted portions as white as paper, as if every drop of blood had been drained from them. Turning quickly, she gagged again, fighting down a wave of nausea.

It was too much! It was unthinkable! She would never be able to summon up the courage to lie down among them, to endure their bodies being piled in upon her. She might close her eyes and nose to lock out the

gruesome sight, the repulsive odor, but to be surrounded by death, to feel it like a sheet rubbing against her skin, seeping into her pores would be more than she could tolerate!

She drew back as they emerged from inside carrying the bloated remains of an old man, swinging him between them up onto the load, so effortlessly and so matter-of-factly she recoiled in horror at the sight. One would have thought they were loaded grain sacks!

She could not do it, not without gagging and vomiting and otherwise giving herself away. Maybe Elison had the steel for such a test, maybe Margaret Grandly and her friends, but she did not. Staring at the half-loaded vehicle, she imagined a body sprawling on top of her, one leg between hers, its back hard against her breasts, the head alongside hers, touching cheeks, the clammy feeling of lifeless flesh shooting through her like a spasm of pain.

She started back down the way she had come to reclaim her clothes and put them back on, but stopped. With luck she might make it back to her cell without being caught, but what then? Surely the turnkey would give her over to the guard. More than likely she would end up deprived of rations and locked in a dark box of a room until her trial came up. In the dock, before justice and jury, she might be able to prove her innocence and cheat the hangman, but even if they did let her go by then the sabat would have come and gone and heaven only knew when the next one would be.

She hesitated. She had come all this way on her wits, on her resourcefulness and courage, battling rapists and disease, the ignorance, stupidity and depravity of those around her and her own heartache and loneliness. She had seen murder and the horror of the plague; she had cheated death herself. The solitary candle still left flickering was Elison Beecher. Mother Damnable alone could and would reunite her with Ross. Now, with the fat in the fire, could she do this, could she—with her

last chance in the palm of her hand—throw it away?

Gritting her teeth, she started back toward the vehicle. They came out, adding another corpse to the growing pile. Climbing in now would be foolhardy. Better she wait until they were fully loaded and the sheet was in place. She would climb over the tailboard and lie down against it. There would be corpses under her, but the two men seemed to be stacking them like cordwood, heads at the far end, feet at the rear, so she would be lying across feet and ankles only.

"That should do it for this trip, Will."

"How many did you count?"

"Twenty-two."

"That's four more than last time."

"And four more than that next time. 'Tis a sorry business, this discomfort. Let's get the sheet o'er the poor souls and be off."

Her back flush against the side of the building, she could hear the sheet being thrown over the load, the door shut and locked, and the two men climbing up onto the seat.

"Let's go, Abijah!"

The whip cracked over the horse, the wheels turned, the wagon lurched forward. Pushing away from the wall, she ran to the tailboard, clutching it, pulling herself up over it sideways onto a tangle of legs and pulling the sheet over her. Shuddering, she pinched her nose between thumb and forefinger, turning her face to the rear.

They proceeded down the alley at a leisurely pace, the whip cracking every few seconds. Through the inner doorway and across the yard they headed, the clicking sound of the pavement giving way to the duller rhythm of the animal's shoes striking the rain-softened ground. She guessed it to be less than a hundred feet from the inner door to the front door and presently she heard a voice hailing them and the sound of bolts being thrown and hinges groaning as the door was



opened. Within seconds now they would be through and out into the street. And seconds after that she would lift herself up and get down. A quick look around to get her bearings—no, better she stay put. She'd lift the edge of the sheet just enough to look out and watch for the church. Once they'd passed it she'd get out. With a little luck, she'd catch sight of Elison waiting on the porch even before she got down.

The grating sound of the door closing behind them was music! Then the wagon stopped abruptly, the clopping hooves ceasing followed by a loud thump!

"My God, Will, he's gie it o'er, he's dead!"

"Abijah! Abijah!"

The wagon groaned and swayed as they climbed down. Her heart began pounding like a sledge as she lifted the edge of the sheet and peered out to discover the tailboard so close to the door she could almost reach out and touch it. Lowering the sheet, she waited, the muscles in the back of her neck tightening, pulling her shoulders into a knot.

"Get up, boy, up!"

"Be ye daft? He's dead as the ones in the back!"

"Poor old fellow, I told you! I said it!"

"All right, you did. Who cares? What's tae be done noo? We'll hae tae get us anoother horse, we will. Help me undo the traces."

"What do we do with the wagon? We can't leave it here."

"We'll roll it back inside 'til we get back. Call the guard, tell him open the door!"

Lifting the sheet a second time, she threw her legs down, and, hanging onto the tailboard, let herself down quickly and quietly. Crouching, moving around to the side, she looked past them kneeling on either side of the dead animal and caught sight of the church a short distance up the street on the left. Straightening up, she began running for it.

"Will!"

"Stop her, grab her!"

One hand brushed her thigh, fingers scraping, as she raced by. They shouted at her, but she never looked back, running with all the power and speed she could muster, running for her life, her heart in her mouth, gulping the chill night air, filling her lungs, driving out the stench of the corpses.

"Lisa! Here, child!"

Arms reached out to catch her as she stumbled and would have fallen had not Elison seized and held her firmly. She began sobbing hysterically, uncontrollably.

"Elison, Elison, Elison!"

## IX

"Lavinia, I've never seen you like this before. You're acting like a wild woman!"

"I could kill that dried-up little spider with my bare hands!" Snatching a book from the table, she hurled it against the wall, sending Erica's cat leaping, turning, and scampering into the bedroom up onto the window-sill staring back at them in stark terror. Lavinia continued fuming, cursing loudly, drenching Cyrus with her vitriol, calling down the fates on Settle, Craven, and Ledion as well.

"What's the Master done?"

"He's as bad as the rest. He abuses me, rants and raves at me, turns his back on me when I need Him most. Erica, Erica, it's starting to come apart! Cracks are beginning to show, it's going to collapse completely! I know it, I feel it. I've got to finish it off now!"

"You can't kill her."

"Can't I?"

"How, if you can't get into her room?"

"Sometimes you're incredibly stupid, do you know that? She happens to be the least of my problems."

"But if they won't let you in—"

"You can be the most insufferably thick-headed person on the face of the earth!"

Erica clamped her lips tightly together and frowned, hurt flooding her eyes. "I'm only trying to help," she said. "Just because the old man's outsmarted you, you don't have to take it out on me. I'm the only real friend you've got!"

Lavinia heaved a sigh and slumped down into a chair, staring down at her hands clutching the strings of her bag in her lap. "I'm sorry, I apologize."

"That's all right. Lavinia?"

"What?"

"May I say something?" Lavinia nodded. "This whole thing might not be as bad as you're making it out to be. Maybe it's best you don't kill her."

Lavinia recoiled angrily. "Are you insane? How can I not?" With effort she got control of herself, softening her tone and reaching across the table covered Erica's hand with her own. "The thing is, I'm going to need your help, dear."

"Oh, Lavinia, I couldn't."

"Don't be such a faint-heart, I'm not asking you to commit murder. I just want you to come along. I'll need you when I get to the desk on the second floor."

"For what?"

"Erica, I've got to go back and do it. There's no other way. But I can't just barge in all flags flying. Let me ask you something, how could the two of us get up to the second floor without arousing suspicion?"

"In disguise?"

"Brilliant. Now you're using your head. Disguised as what?"

"Doctors, nurses."

"Better than that, my dear. Who else besides staff can walk into any hospital as big as you please without arousing the slightest suspicion? I'll tell you who. Nuns."

Erica gasped. "Of course! Aren't you something, though!"

"It's ideal, it couldn't be better. But there have to be two of us. A single nun would draw attention instead of averting it. Here's how we work it. We walk in, up to the second floor, go straight up to the floor nurse at the desk, you get her attention, and I take care of her. Then we get her keys."

"You're not going to kill her!"

"The nurse? Certainly not."

"Don't all the nurses know you by sight? Wouldn't whoever it is recognize you?"

"As a nun? You must be joking. With a wimple around my face, no makeup, my face white as a sheet like all the good sisters? I have my beads wrapped round my fists, my head down praying."

"Yes, you could fool anybody like that. Anybody who's ever seen you would never recognize you done up so, your long hair completely hidden, your eyes, lips, skin."

Lavinia's hand went into her bag, producing a small piece of paper neatly folded in half. She handed it to Erica.

Erica read: "Gotham Theatrical Supply."

"It's a receipt. The man is holding two costumes for us. He's open until eight. It's getting on toward seven now. Have you a knife I could borrow?"

## X

Turning the corner into Chalkstone Avenue, they came within sight of the hospital, a gust of wind passing, ruffling their skirts playfully and rushing on down the street. Both wore nun's attire with rosary beads and three-inch crucifixes suspended from silver chains around their necks. Erica also wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

"I hate this," she said glumly.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Just the thought of murdering somebody makes my flesh crawl."

"You don't imagine I'm going to enjoy it, do you? There's simply no other way."

"I don't know."

"What?"

"If you're going to enjoy it."

"Erica, I can do famously without your sarcasm."

"It seems such a waste of time. The minute they find her they'll know it was you."

"How can they possibly know that?"

"The old man already suspects you. He has to have told Ross."

"Suspicion is a far cry from proof, dear."

"You were right, it's all starting to come apart."

"Just shut your mouth and walk faster. You've been whining and carrying on ever since we left the shop and I've had my fill of it! For your information, Ross is the only one I worry about, the only one that matters. It's what he thinks that counts, not Cyrus, or Craven, or anybody else! He's crazy about me, Erica."

"What man isn't?"

Lavinia ignored the sarcasm. "He'd suspect Craven before he'd think it was me!"

"Really? If you can make yourself believe that—"

"You just watch, once she's out of the way he'll forget her in two days! I'll make him!"

"Sticking a knife in her seems so crude, so savage."

"What would you have me do, strangle her? Leave fingermarks on her neck?"

"You could hold a pillow over her face. Then when she's suffocated, put it back under her head. At least it'll appear she died a natural death."

"Maybe you're right."

"Why make it harder for yourself than it is already?"

"Very well, I'll smother the dear child. Anything, just as long as she dies."

They started up the steps to the front door, just as it opened and two nuns came out. They smiled and one made as if to stop Lavinia.

"Excuse me, sister."

"I'm sorry, sister, we're in a great rush."

The other's smile vanished and she and her companion continued on down the steps. Lavinia and Erica paused on the top step and looked back at them.

"This is getting ridiculous," said Erica nervously. "I shouldn't have come."

"Stop talking and listen to me. I'm going in with my head down. It'll look as if I'm saying my beads, so don't talk to me. We'll walk along side by side. When we get to the desk on the second floor, go straight up to whoever's on duty and whisper to her."

"Whisper what?"

"Anything, it doesn't matter. Just as long as she can't make out what it is. She'll lean forward to hear you repeat it. I'll be standing at the side. When she leans over, I'll hit her."

"You won't kill her!"

"I told you I wouldn't! Just knock her out, get her keys, do it and get out."

"What if there's somebody else on the floor?"

"There won't be, not this time of night."

"You said there were three of them at the desk when you came in last night."

"Only because they were changing over. Let's not stand here discussing it all night. Come along."

They walked through the double doors, down the hall past the main desk, up the stairs to the floor desk. Sitting at it was Nurse Pritchard, busy filling in what appeared to be a form of some sort. Good, mused Lavinia. If she had had a choice as to which of the nurses most deserved a lump on the head it would be little Miss Stubborn Refusal.

Erica glanced at Lavinia nervously and getting a stern look and the unspoken command—"Do it"—in return, approached the desk, leaned over and mumbled something. Nurse Pritchard smiled obligingly, pushing one ear closer to Erica. Down came Lavinia's fist, like a hammer flush on the back of the girl's neck, sending her sprawling across the desk, her pencil rattling against the floor as it landed. Snatching her key ring, Lavinia turned on Erica.

"You stay here. I'll be right back."

She started down the corridor, fumbling through the keys on the ring as she went. At once, Erica began running the other way, heading for the stairs. Hearing her heels clicking against the stone floor, Lavinia stopped.

"Erica! Damn you, come back here!"

Cursing, she turned back to the keys, reached the door and began trying one key after another. The fourth one fitted, unlocking the door. The room was as black as the pit, the shades drawn down to the sills, obscuring the iron grating. Running to the bed, she began fumbling about, found the pillow, snatching it up and jamming it back down onto the bed.

Something was wrong! Letting the pillow drop, she began feeling about. The bed was empty! At that instant



the door swung wide, flooding the room with light from the hall. With the light behind him she could not make out his face, but the shape of his head and his round shoulders were instantly recognizable.

Craven! Behind him stood a burly policeman in uniform.

"She's not there, Miss Cartwright. Officer, do your duty."

## XI

A brilliant, blood-red sun hovered over the pool, filling it with a vivid pink and building a furious heat from surface to depths. She swam, thrashing and kicking desperately, struggling to reach the haze-mantled shore, but as she moved toward it it receded, shrinking from her like a living creature fearful of her touch. Swinging about, she made for the opposite shore. But with the same result. Her heart began thumping furiously; her strength was ebbing now, deserting her, her arms and legs aching dully and the dread realization that she would soon become exhausted raised a wave of panic.

She began treading water, casting about in every direction to determine the nearest land, but there was no discernible difference in distance. Filling her lungs, she dove silently, praying that approaching below the surface might enable her to close upon the shoreline without its moving from her. The moment her face broke the surface a terrifying sight met her eyes. The sun, sending its light all the way to the bottom of the pool, revealed it covered with nude men and women lying row upon row. Even more shocking was the sight of a single empty space, room for one more body only. They lay motionless, neatly set, entirely obscuring the bowl of the pool, their eyes tightly shut. She assumed they were dead until coming within a few feet of a group they suddenly began reaching upward for her. Twisting her body to avoid them, she shot to the surface, caught her breath, summoned her waning strength and tried for the shore again.

But it was useless. The relentless heat, exhaustion rapidly overtaking her, the burning in her lungs, the

sight below indelibly etched on her mind, the fear and confusion brought a desperate cry for help to her throat. But she could not let it out, and for the first time she realized that she could not hear herself swimming. There was no sound of any sort.

The aching in her thighs and arms began increasing in intensity. Lifting her left arm, she could see blood spurting out of it halfway between elbow and wrist. At once she was aware of a curious drawing sensation in the other arm, the water being rapidly sucked into her vein.

Putting all her remaining strength into slowly treading water, she closed her eyes and began praying. Then, at the insistence of a voice close to her ear, she slowly opened her eyes.

"You're all right, child, stop kicking. You're fine, don't be afraid."

The raw wood underside of the floor above was so low she imagined she could reach up and touch it. The room was unfamiliar, a cramped, close little pocket of a place, dingy and shabbily furnished, now that she was able to look about. A dirty window filtered the yellow light of the sun and it fell in a wide swath across the counterpane. Elison was bending over her, smiling. Behind her stood a younger woman, a dark-skinned, troubled-looking stranger, until Lisa recalled that she had been introduced to her earlier when she and Elison had first arrived at the house.

"It's all over," said the woman in a deep voice as unhappy as her appearance. Easing by Elison, she straightened the bedcovers with a practiced hand. "You made a rocky time of it for yourself, my girl, thrashing about like the African fever. Bad dreams?"

"When are there not bad dreams with the blood rite?" asked Elison matter-of-factly. "How do you feel?"

"Weak as water. I doubt I can even move my fingers."

Elison tapped the woman on the shoulder. She nod-

ded and went away returning at once with a steaming bowl of broth.

"Kidney, it's delicious. Best thing in the world to build up strength."

"Thank you."

The woman began spooning it into her. It was too hot, but it was indeed very tasty.

"This is Millicent Conover, Lisa," said Elison, "a sister. She was at the esbat. She's got some good news for you. The weekly Bills of Mortality came out this morning and a dear friend of yours made honors."

"Big shoulders, fat face." Millicent's hands worked through the air.

"Beady eyes!"

"I couldn't see his eyes," said Millicent wryly.

"Simon!"

Elison nodded. "They don't publish the names, of course, but it was him, all right. I never forget a face."

"Tell me."

"You, Millicent."

"It was all what you might call coincidence. My Ted's been missing a long time, ever since the riot at the iron-monger's in Darnley Row. A coach-and-four ran down a little boy and killed him, and the family's friends and neighbors flew into a rage."

"Never mind that part," said Elison.

"People were hurt and killed and some missing, including my Ted. He's not the sort to up and walk so naturally I been fearing the worst." Handing the broth to Elison she went to the window, looking out, her back to them, her voice tinged with sadness. "I go round every morning seven days the week looking over bodies, hoping I won't find him, but knowing I got to look all the same."

"I'd told her about Simon," said Elison. "It would have been like his sort to come running back here once word got out you'd escaped."

"That's true."

"Millicent spotted him early this morning in a row of corpses laid out in a warehouse down by Gardenstairs. She told me and I went over to see for myself. It was handsome Simon."

"You think he caught the plague?"

"I didn't see any sores, but the left side of his face was puffed up like a fish."

"His eye, blood poisoning."

"It must have been a painful way to go," said Millicent, turning and facing them.

Elison nodded. "Serves the bastard right. And makes one less headache for you, child. How do you feel now?"

"The broth helps."

"We'll feed you fat and by tomorrow you'll be good as new. And on your feet the day after."

"I have to be. I've got to make this, Elison, I'm so close now I can almost grab it with the tips of my fingers. I've got to keep moving forward."

"Stop worrying, you'll make it."

"Even if you don't, you'll be all right here," observed Millicent. "There's worse times and places to live."

It was a casual, well-meant opinion uttered with no intention of upsetting her. But it did.

"You can keep it! I'm fed to the teeth with it!"

"Lisa—" began Elison.

"I'm sick to death of this skin I'm in! I want to tear it off me. It's gotten so every time I see this face in a glass, this total stranger I want to scream! What am I doing in this jail? Day in day out I look at her hair, her skin, her mouth, with her eyes! I hear with her ears! I breathe, I feel pain, I feel ill, exhausted. I taste, but none of it's me! It's somebody dead two hundred years! God forgive me, you're all dead! London's dead! This whole world is!

"How long can I go on living inside a corpse? When will it all stop, her heart, her lungs—"

"Don't upset yourself so, child." Elison stroked her

forehead, then began wiping the perspiration from her face and neck with a cloth. "We understand, we know your life's no bed of roses."

"I don't mean Simon or the plague or the Marshall-sea, even this wretched time and place; it's this being forced to keep a dead body alive. I don't even know how I'm doing it, or how it's being done for me. It's like being shut inside a box in pitch darkness and forced to make what little air you have last you, knowing that when it's used up everything stops. Every day at least once I think ending it all has to make more sense than going on like this."

Elison searched her eyes. "And what about him?"

The effect was instantaneous. Lisa had risen on one elbow; now she sank back staring at the ceiling, her eyes welling with tears.

"He's all there is that keeps me going."

"Three more days," said Elison quietly.

Millicent nodded. "Let's have some more broth."

## XII

The breeze thrust itself through the stout branches of the oaks ringing the crest of the hill, rustling the leaves, moaning plaintively, inspiring dejection and an aching loneliness within her. Dressed in a loosely-fitting mustard-colored woolen robe, she stood with the other initiates waiting for the ceremony to begin. Around her neck was a red cord, trailing down her back to her wrists bound behind her and continuing down to her ankles; it was tied less tightly there so that she could walk. The silence, broken only by the murmur of the breeze, the moving branches scraping the face of the saffron moon, the stars staring down, eyeing her critically, she imagined, the feeling of loneliness in the midst of so many people moving about quietly and ignoring her, combined to lend an eerie, other-worldly mood to the setting.

Her thoughts went back to the bedroom at Millicent Conover's and the two days that had elapsed since the blood rite. The whole affair had been very sensibly scheduled. She had needed those two days to recover. She had passed most of the second afternoon writing a lengthy letter to Izaak Golightly, explaining everything in detail, feeling that she owed him and Timothy Radwell that much. She had given the letter to Elison, who had promised to post it as soon as it was all over.

Izaak and Timothy, Meggo and Mansfield. The longer she was away from them, the more they seemed as if they had never really existed. They were getting to be more like people, places and incidents in a dream, vague impressions conjured up and skillfully woven together, just as Elison, Simon, Walter Fitzgibbons and

everyone else in London, even the city itself would soon be woven together and immersed in memory.

Now the next-to-the-last step was before her. The initiation, the ceremony, the nightmare reversed and home to Providence, to his arms, his love and all that Lavinia had stolen from her.

Lavinia. They would come face to face and she would once again be able to look into her lovely eyes. What explanation would she give her? How would she attempt to justify what she had done?

"Relax, child, you look worried to death!" It was Elison coming up behind her, putting her arm around her shoulder.

"I'm all right. When will it begin?"

"The priest is just arriving. Look." She gestured down the rise to a figure in an ankle-length white robe, his hood hanging well forward of his face, concealing his features, the cloth flapping gently on both sides as he moved toward them.

"Did you say priest?"

She smiled. "Patience, everything will be explained. And everything will turn out just fine." She glided off. Lisa glanced about. The other three initiates identically dressed and bound were lined up behind her. Had she a choice in the matter she would not have been the first to be tested, preferring instead to watch at least one of the others precede her. She hoped she had everything down pat, every name, every syllable. She mustn't slip up accidentally. She couldn't fail. Any second chance, if there was such a thing, would be worthless. These two hours out of her entire lifetime would either pave the way to setting things right or send her down to destruction.

In front of the altar covered with a white cloth, a circle twenty feet in diameter had been laid out using strips of red cloth. This, Elison had informed her, would be consecrated in order to keep the power generated by those involved in the ceremony within it.



Laid over it was a smaller circle, a single piece of black silk half the size of the circle beneath. Four red candles standing nearly two feet high were set at the four points of the compass around it.

To the north, an intricately carved mahogany reliquary had been placed. Inside it, according to Elison, was a single opal, the concentration point for the priest. Above the base of the reliquary, a word was carved—LIDDA. On either side stood two pewter candlesticks in the shape of serpents.

Behind the reliquary was a brass stand supporting a censer filled with burning sandalwood. Now and again, when the breeze changed direction, the pungent fumes carried over the circle to her.

Suddenly a flash of white light shot up from the ground between two trees, a puff of smoke rising and dissolving to reveal a tall, broad-shouldered, cloaked figure standing in shadow. At once everyone present fell to their knees bowing and chanting.

This went on until Elison appeared in the center of the circle carrying a wand and sword which she placed diagonally across it. A plate of salt was set midway between north and east and across from it, a silver goblet filled with water.

Kneeling in the center of the circle, the priest began laying out tarot cards, chanting loudly as he did so, consecrating the circle. Retrieving the cards, he then placed them upon the altar already occupied by a scourge, pentacle and a knife with a black onyx hilt.

Now, all present except the initiates removed their robes, standing naked in place, revealing silver jewelry adorning their bodies. The candlelight and the light of the moon lent an unearthly roseate glow to bare flesh, reminding her of the rows of people lining the bottom and sides of the pool in her dream. Stepping out of their fallen robes, the witches formed a ring outside the circle, facing each other and joining hands while the priest approached the cloaked figure standing motion-

less between the trees, dropped to his knees and did obeisance.

Elison stood before the altar, arms outstretched and raised, palms outward representing the ancient Mother Goddess. Returning to the circle, the priest—himself symbolic of the Horned God, ancient deity of the hunt, of procreation and masculinity—raised the sword, as everything else was removed from the circle, leaving the four candles only. Holding the sword overhead, he turned slowly, describing a circle in the air. Then he placed the sword on the altar, picked up the chalice filled with water and sprinkled it about.

"Oh thou circle, be thou meeting place of LIDDA's children. Shield us against the wickedness and evil of the outsiders."

Incantations followed: "Zeba, Zeba, Kolak, Zeba, Zeba, Tudar, Zeba, Zeba."

The dance began, the music coming out of the darkness beyond the ring of trees, everyone but the initiates joining in. The ring broke, the line doubling back on itself, hands reaching, fondling, breasts and buttocks rubbing, the unseemly conduct becoming more and more obvious as the thump of the drum and squeal of pipes began building into a frenzied wailing sound. On and on they danced, swirling, writhing, wrenching about until the music reached its peak and one by one they began dropping. Presently the music stopped, cut off sharply, leaving the witches sprawled about in and around the circle.

Millicent Conover approached her, untied her, removed her robe, retied her hands only in front of her, and placed a blindfold over her eyes.

"Hearken ye to the charge of Diana, the Mother Goddess, called among men Lebunor, Artemis, Mithla, Zenor, Aphrodite, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Cerridwen, Arianrod, Dana, Bride—"

Elison interrupted: "At mine sacred altars the sisters of Chaldema made sacrifice. Assemble yet in secret

coven, protected from the eyes of the unbelievers, to venerate the spirit of me, the Queen of Witches. Assemble ye who would master the deepest and most secret of all knowledge, the arcanum and arcanorum, the sorcery of the damned, mysteries of mysteries of the Old Religion. Out of the realm of Lucifer I bring thee intelligence."

The tests followed, questions answered, passages memorized recited, the endless names and titles, the signs and symbols defined and explained, the instructions, the numbers, the tarot, the runes, the ball. On and on it went until she grew so tired she could scarcely keep from collapsing. Gradually the breeze grew chill and she began to feel colder, her flesh tightening and shiver after shiver lancing up her spine.

At last the testing was concluded and it came time for the ritual of death and rebirth within the group.

"Take heed, ye lords of East, South, West and North, that Nila is become one with the ideals and purposes of LIDDA and prepared to become a priestess of Satan!"

Elison handed him the scourge from the altar and he began flailing Lisa lightly about the face and shoulders. "Ye have passed the tests, Nila. Swear now that thou wilt abide by the tenets of the Old Religion, that all that ye have mastered, all secrets already known and in future imparted to thee will be guarded by thee until death and descent. Swear!"

"I swear."

Again she knelt, was anointed with the oil of Hathor, kissed a second time by the priest and her blindfold and wrist cords removed.

"Children of Lidda," roared the priest, "you will judge Nila!"

Small white stones began raining into the circle from all sides, striking her legs and ankles. She dared to look down. They were white stones only! The chant of acceptance was begun, her witch name repeated again and

again. Elison and Millicent smiled and waved, but in the midst of the chanting a loud voice interrupted.

"Outsiders!"

All eyes turned to Him standing between the trees. He pointed down the hill. Far below a twisting line of torches was starting upward, like a fiery serpent ascending. Down the opposite side a second line also became visible.

Consternation seized the gathering, voices crying out in panic and confusion. Elison broke through the crowd, shoving the yellow robe into Lisa's hands.

"Come, quickly! If they catch us we'll both end up back in the Marshalsea!"

## XIII

The bowl of the moon spilled its contents through the bars in the small window high up the wall, drenching the bare floor beside the cot. Lavinia stirred restlessly, rolling over, looking up at the window. A familiar figure leaped into view, rubbing his side against the four bars and purring audibly. Back and forth he strutted, raising his head proudly, continuing to sing his satisfaction, as if to call the night's attention to his lofty promenade.

"Mody!" Jumping to her feet she stood on the cot reaching for him with both hands, but he shrank from her, retreating to the edge of the window well out of reach, peering around the corner at her. "Evil bastard! Where have you been?" She hesitated, softening her tone, injecting appeal into it. "Come down here, you handsome brute. Handsome Mody, come to mother."

The jail contained four individual cells lined up in a row, each with an identical small window looking out upon the world, but too high for her to use. She occupied the cell nearest the heavy wooden door, which terminated the narrow walkway paralleling the barred doors and opening to the outer office. The remaining three cells were presently vacant. She had been arrested, brought in, given a dismally plain gray cotton dress in exchange for her habit, her name and the charge had been entered in a weighty-looking book by the desk sergeant, she was admitted to her cell, given bed clothing and locked in.

The entire spectacle was preposterous, of course! She was guilty of nothing. Lisa's bed had been empty. Obviously it was a trap, suggested by Cyrus and set by Craven, a crude device engineered to confirm their sus-

picious. They'd caught their prey, for all the good it would do either of them. All they could actually hold her for was assaulting Pritchard, and people simply didn't go on trial and to prison for anything so patently trivial! No, damn them all, she would not permit it to upset her. She would take full advantage of the city's hospitality for the night and demand to be released first thing in the morning. If they refused to let her go, she would ask to see Ross.

"He'll take care of everything!" she announced aloud, confidently.

Ignoring Mody, she lay back down on the bed, drawing the blanket up under her chin, fuming vigorously, heaping imprecations on the horned toad and Craven for crossing her, and Ledion and Erica and Settle for not giving her the help she needed. Then she saw it, a slender rivulet of water sliding down the wall, coming from the base of the window. Reaching out, she touched it with the tip of her finger, dividing it evenly. It was warm. Curious, she slowly brought her finger to her nose.

"I shouldn't taste it if I were you."

She froze. Ledion!

"Master?"

As if deriving new courage at His sudden arrival, Mody crept back out into full view, staring down at her, his eyes fired with evil.

"Lavinia, Lavinia."

"Where are you?" In the pale light of the moon the interior of the cell was clearly visible, but she could see no one, inside or outside the bars. His voice seemed to be coming from the corner nearest the outer door, but there was no sign of Him, not even the ghostly outline of His figure.

"There's no need for you to see me. Wipe the blood off your finger."

"Blood?"

"Very special blood, drawn from the veins of a poor defenseless creature mixed with poison and intended for me."

"I don't understand."

"Please, can't you for once in your life resist playing your game? Can't you make yourself accept the obvious? I'm not a fool, Lavinia, I see everything. What I miss, others see for me."

"I lost my head, I never meant—"

"You lost your head. A condition for which you have the most alarmingly consistent propensity."

"I meant you no harm."

"You meant to kill me."

"I didn't know what I was doing! I was out of my head with worry, with fear. You killed Gray, you were going to kill Ross, I panicked!"

"So they caught you in the act. And now it's all over."

"It's not that bad. I didn't harm her, she wasn't even in the room! They can't do anything to me."

"Don't be stupid, you attempted murder. They can put you away for ten years."

"I don't believe it!"

"Don't."

Rising from the cot, she began pacing nervously. "You're lying, you must be. Why do you taunt me so?"

"It's finished. They'll lock you up in a box and he and the girl, all of them will forget you ever existed. You'll spend the next ten years eating rotten food, sleeping with roaches and other crawling things, staring into your mirror watching your beauty fade like a dying flower, watching the wrinkles and the gray hairs and the white hairs."

"Stop it! Listen to me, I beg you."

"Yes?"

"I've wronged you, I know that. What I did was heartless, unforgivable, but I was desperate! You know

I was. I love you, Master, I've always given myself to you freely, without questioning. I adore it, there's nothing I love more! You enjoy me."

"Always. That's the saddest part of all this."

"What do you mean? You're not going to let them take me. You can't!"

"I can't?"

"Think about it. Forget the cup, the blood, forget Gray and Ross, Settle. Think just about us, me under you, your member deep inside me, the two of us copulating, your body hard against mine. I see the wild look in your eyes, the fire in the fire! Knotted together you and I are one. We start, we should never stop! It's the only thing for us, you can't deny it. Show yourself, Ledion, take me, I want you, I have to have you!"

"Silence!"

She laughed hollowly, startling Mody, sending him fleeing to his cover.

"This is fantastic. I don't believe you'd throw me away like this!"

"Give yourself time, Lavinia. You'll believe it."

And He was gone, and Mody with Him. Again and again she called his name, pleading with him to come back until the outer door clicked open and a policeman stuck his head in.

"What's going on here? What are you yelling at?"

"Nothing, never mind, leave me alone."

"You want something, lady, you call and ask for it. There's no need to yell and wake up the whole city!"

"Get out!"

She slept fitfully that night, beset not by concern over her difficulties with the law, but rather the realization that having failed to kill Lisa her immediate chances for a second opportunity were discouragingly remote.

But only in the present context. With Settle out of the way, there was no possibility Lisa could be brought back. She would have to be sent back. This, at least



according to Ledion, was a very real possibility. But suppose she was? Suppose she suddenly arose from her bed brimming with health precipitating a joyous reunion? She could still die. She could meet with a very cleverly arranged and alarmingly fatal "accident."

She ought to have killed the little bitch in the first place! She should never have listened to Him, to Erica, to anyone. Still it was much too late to cry over that particular spilt milk. It wasn't over, not at all. Lisa was still imprisoned in 1665. At this end, despite her own incarceration, Erica was still about and available to help. Dearest Erica. Settle might blackmail her, Ledion turn His back on her, Mody desert her, but dear loyal Erica would always be there when she needed her. Then she recalled how Erica had run off the moment Pritchard was knocked out. The spineless simpleton! She had the guts of a fish! Still, it was a good thing she had run. Had she stayed with her, had they gone into the room together Erica would be in the next cell right now.

She could not worry Ledion's worry. They would never bring her to trial for attempted murder. She would never permit it to come to that; to be put on public exhibition in such a disgusting manner was out of the question. With Erica's help or Ross's, somebody's, she would get out and out of the country before the arm of justice reached out for her.

She woke up the next morning feeling more fatigued than when she had fallen asleep. After breakfast the guard who had brought her her meal came back with word that she had a visitor.

"Mr. Dandridge."

"Show him in."

"You can have ten minutes."

"We can have as long as we please."

"The rule says ten minutes and rules is rules."

"Show him in, dammit!"

Ross came in, the policeman taking up his position, standing arms folded, staring in at them.

"You may leave," said Lavinia crisply. The small round eyes blinked nervously. Obviously the man wasn't accustomed to prisoners who treated him in such a manner. The look on his face was all she needed to persuade her that he had neither the ability nor the inclination to exercise his authority.

"It's all right," said Ross. "I'll be accountable. We have personal matters to discuss."

"Yes sir, Mr. Dandridge." The man's hand went to the bill of his cap deferentially. "I'll have to lock the outer door, though. When you're done, just you knock on it and I'll let you out."

"Thank you."

He left them alone.

"Stupid idiot!"

"Vinnie, what do I say to you? What is this madness? Why in heaven's name did you do such a thing?"

"I didn't do anything, my darling. This whole business is a monstrous misunderstanding."

"You tried to murder her! Craven—"

"Craven is a filthy liar! He despises me because I see through him like glass. The man's a total fraud; he can't even look me in the eye. A decent doctor, anyone with an ounce of ability, would have brought her back weeks ago. I blame myself. When you wanted to get rid of him I was the one who stuck up for him. I've never done anything quite so stupid before in my entire life!"

"Vinnie, will you shut your mouth! It's over, don't you understand? You had me completely fooled, but the scales have dropped! Jesus Christ, you tried to murder her! You would have if Cyrus hadn't intervened. Thank the gods for that magnificent old man! He saw you for what you really are. Stupid me, I wouldn't listen to him."

Seizing him suddenly, she pulled his head down and began kissing him passionately. But he broke from her, turning to the wall to avoid looking at her.

"My darling, you're right. Why deny the obvious? I

tried to kill her, yes. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"Christ Almighty!"

"Don't you see? Don't you understand, you drove me to it! You made it necessary. Oh darling, I love you so I'd kill anyone who stands in the way of our happiness."

"Stop it! I don't want to hear any more of it! It's the same Goddamned speech you gave Gray, isn't it? What in hell are you, Vinnie? What's inside you that's twisted you up so?"

"I didn't love Gray, my darling. It's you, it's always been you. Never anybody but. He was just a substitute, that's all. When you went away, Ross, I died! All the life went out of me, my blood draining drop by drop. I felt like stone. Totally destroyed. I ached so for you I wanted to kill myself. Believe me, I tried."

"Vinnie, please. I don't believe a word. How do you expect me to? You're a rational, intelligent human being. How in the name of God could you do it to her? She loved you, we all loved you."

"We all loved you. Did 'we'? Who, Ross? Justine? Gray? Lisa? Nobody loved me, darling, nobody could because nobody in a family like this one ever has to love their maiden Aunt Vinnie. Close-knit families treat their Aunt Vinnies with kindness and tolerance, with understanding and patience, tongue-clucking indulgence, if you will, but never love. There's no love for me in this world, except yours. Except what we feel for each other."

"I don't love you!"

"You don't mean that, darling. We've had each other, not once but twice. And how many times have you had me when I wasn't even there! How many times did you drive it into me and sweep us to the heights? Did she ever do that for you, Ross? In her wildest dreams could she give you what I did? Can a child be a woman, my darling?"

"I love her more than any living thing! In ten

thousand years you could never give me what she's given me in a few short weeks. You don't have it to give, not to me or Gray or any man!"

With all the force and fury she could muster, she slapped him flush across the face, the sound of contact striking the wall and echoing down the narrow little corridor.

"You ungrateful bastard!"

"Vinnie, I'm sorry. I pity you so it makes me sick to my stomach. I have to go now. I won't be back, there's no reason for me to come back." He sighed and studied the floor. "I've made arrangements for a lawyer for you. His name is George Staples. He's extremely capable."

"Get out of here! Get out of my sight! Guard! Guard!"

"There's something else. Cyrus believes that it was you who got her into this condition, this trance, whatever it is. Did you, Vinnie?"

"He's out of his mind."

The door opened, the policeman pushing his head in.

"One more minute," said Ross. The man retreated leaving the door ajar. "Listen to me, if you put her into it, you can bring her out. This is your chance. I don't have to tell you how terrible this thing is, it's tantamount to murder. If she doesn't come out of it it is murder. So if it's in your power to—"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Do it, Vinnie and I give you my solemn word the law will never lay a finger on you. I promise you'll go free. Then you can pack up and go wherever you like. I'll see you get all the money you need."

"Guard! Guard!"

## XIV

That afternoon a man arrested for public drunkenness and one charged with beating his wife were brought in and placed in two of the three unoccupied cells. The drunk, still drunk as he had been earlier, was locked in and left by the guard, launching into a rambling monologue decrying man's inhumanity to man, the unfairness of the criminal justice system and the deleterious effects of cheap rye whiskey upon the human liver.

His audience, the wife-beater, found him entertaining. Lavinia was not amused. As soon as Ross had left her she sank into a state of depression. An hour later George Staples, a bright, enthusiastic, and passionately optimistic young lawyer arrived, but failed to lift her from the depths. She had lost Ross, worse, thrown him away. Accepting this all-too-obvious turn was a painful blow. Had she loved him less ardently, she would not have felt quite so miserable. But to see her hunger for him suddenly crushed under the weight of his loathing was unbearable.

Love could so easily be turned into contempt, so swiftly, like a coin turned over. But she could be just as flexible. Within her, she knew, was a capacity for hatred so powerful that only revenge, plotted and successfully executed could ease its grip on her. If he could hurt her like this, if he was capable of giving his heart to her—only to pull it back and reject her so cruelly—he deserved everything she could do to make him regret it as long as he lived.

She was still brooding over the situation, and feeling profoundly sorry for herself when Erica was announced and ushered in. She wore a bonnet, with long ribbons

half-concealing her face, and a pair of ill-fitting spectacles. In her reticule was a folded newspaper.

"Oh, Lavinia, I'm so sorry."

"For what, running out on me when I needed you? When I was counting on you?"

"You're lucky I did," said Erica in a hurt tone. "I'm not like you, I don't have your heart or your stomach. It took all the courage I could muster just to show up here now."

"Why the bonnet and spectacles? Is that supposed to be a disguise?"

"Sssssh."

"Erica, you are pathetic!"

"You're in a vile mood, I must say."

"Did you expect to find me dancing, kicking my heels for joy?"

"Has he been to see you?"

"Been and gone, the bastard. My own son, my own flesh and blood."

"What did he say?"

"None of your business." She laughed. "The dear boy sent me a lawyer, can you imagine?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"He wants me to plead insanity."

"If it'll keep you out of prison—"

"I won't be needing any lawyer, Erica. I don't plan to go to court."

Erica narrowed her eyes in sudden interest. "The Master's going to get you out."

"Keep your voice down!"

"He is!"

"He is not. Don't mention that conniving bastard to me. I hate him with a passion!"

"They're all bastards, aren't they?"

"You bet they are."

"Are you going to try to escape? How?"

"With your help, dear."

Erica gasped and straightened up, a look of alarm in her eyes. "Oh no."

"Be quiet and listen. There's no danger, not for you at any rate. But before we get into it, there's something you must do for me. Ledion refuses to lift a finger to stop them sending her back. It could happen anytime now. So obviously her body has to be destroyed, now, today!"

"Don't talk nonsense. What on earth would be the point? You've lost him, what possible good would killing her do you?"

"Are you blind as well as stupid? Do you think for a moment I'd let him get away with rejecting me like this? He's got to be punished, they all do. Even Ledion."

"You're mad!"

"Not a bit."

"It makes no sense. I can understand your wanting her out of the way to give you a chance to win his love, but now all you want is revenge."

"Put 'sweet' in front of it, Erica. And why not? Can you think of anyone who deserves it more? I'm going to war, my dear, starting here and now! I'll fight until they're both dead, and the old man, Craven. Anybody who's balked me—they'll die and that's all there is to it!"

"You can't get out of here. What are you going to do, put a curse on them?"

"I'll need your help."

"Count me out. I don't want to be in on any more attempted murders."

Lavinia got up from the edge of the cot and crossing to the door, set her shoulders against the bars, staring down at her with a despising look. Her voice was like ice: "You will do exactly as I tell you, if, that is, you want to continue to enjoy your freedom."

Erica got up from the stool. "I'm going, call the guard."

"Sit down, you sniveling little bitch. You will help me

whether you want to or not. You're in too deeply, already. You may have gotten away from the hospital, but one word from me to that policeman outside and you won't set foot through that door. You were an accomplice to attempted murder, my dear. You're forgetting, they took a knife from me that you gave me. It was you who advised I suffocate her instead of using it. It would look like an accident, you said. Your idea, Erica. You suggested I call Ledion in originally. She wouldn't be where she is now if you hadn't helped me. You've been a principal in this thing since the beginning. You're in it now up to your neck. If I'm going to prison, you're going. We'll be cellmates."

"You are the sovereign bitch of the ages!"

"And you are the tool. Now I'm putting you to work. The first thing you're going to do for me is burn down that hospital."

"Impossible! How could I? What do you expect me to do, place rags soaked with kerosene around the foundation? It won't work, it can't!"

"I want her body destroyed."

"Then do it yourself. You can say what you like to whomever you like, but I'm not murdering anybody." Taking the newspaper out of her reticule, she unfolded it before her, disclosing the headline.

### DANDRIDGE KIN CHARGED WITH ATTEMPTED MURDER!

The two-column story carried halfway down the page. Lavinia scanned it hurriedly.

"It says I'm to be transferred tomorrow to the State Prison."

"It says you may be. Further up they mention the Butler Hospital for the Insane."

Lavinia smiled as she reread it more carefully. "Listen to this, at the suggestion of Dr. Alexander Craven, the accused may be moved to Butler for sanity tests. Dear Dr. Craven, he keeps turning up like a bad penny." She tapped the paper sharply. "This is it, Erica. Where-



ever they move me, that'll be my chance. It'd be a waste of time trying to break out of this place, but in the police van out in the street—I'll have to know all about that, what type of vehicle it is, how many guards; find out all you can."

"How?"

"Talk to your friends, dammit! Somebody must know somebody else who's been in jail or prison. Get onto it right away. And when you come back tonight, bring me a knife. Bring me your runes too."

"Lavinia?"

"Don't argue with me, do it!"

Erica sighed. "I'm sorry I even came."

"Lucky for you you did. If I were to tell these idiots—"

"All right, all right."

"Be back here at seven."

"What if I can't find out anything?"

"You will, I have complete faith in you. Now, get out of here, and take this silly newspaper with you."

No sooner was Erica out the door than she began having second thoughts. She posed a very real threat to the little tarot lover, an ominous threat. Were she in Erica's shoes she'd lose no time in taking the initiative. She'd certainly never bring her any knife. Instead she'd go straight to the police and spill the beans. Then they'd tell her to smuggle in the knife after all. "And when the prisoner is moved, we'll be ready for her." Once in the van she'd never get out alive.

Thank goodness Erica was Erica. A born coward with all the imagination of a damp stone!

## XV

The single elm in the corner of the yard three stories below stood among its dead leaves like a beggar stripped of his rags, the wind swirling about the area unable to reach inside the fence into the corner to steal them. Looking down, Ross studied the tree, imagining its approaching dormancy, its sap slowing, stopping inside its miles of slender passages, temporarily divested of its ability to support life along its branches and twigs, the ground freezing, cutting off its water. If, he thought, it could survive the harsh and bitter weather of the long months to come without nourishment, if hibernating animals could, could a human being? The comparison gave him an uncomfortable feeling. It wasn't worth the effort of concentration. Pushing it out of mind, he turned from the window to glance about the room. It was identical to the one directly below it which Lisa had previously occupied, even to the color of the walls.

She lay as still as death, no sign of breathing, her flesh waxen, her eyes tightly sealed. Great God, how he hated the sight! His hand went to his eyes covering them, blocking it out, and he turned back to the window.

"Afternoon." It was Craven, his suit rumpled and ill-fitting, the little hair still clinging to life at the sides of his scalp askew, his eyes red with fatigue as usual. He went straight to the bed, bending over her, his stethoscope joining his ear to her heart, checking her pulse with his other hand. Time crept forward and he straightened, a disturbed look on his face.

"Have you been to see your aunt?"

"Yes. Though why I bothered I'll never know."

"Did you get around to talking about this? I mean

the cause of it?" He touched the bedsheet. "Did she give you any clue, any hint?"

"Nothing."

"Cyrus seems to think she's responsible. He keeps harping on it."

"I know, but how could she do such a thing? With mirrors, magic powder?"

"Somebody did something. And she certainly seems to have the motive."

"Agreed. But if she knows anything, she'll die before she'll ever tell any of us."

"What a shame. Caught red-handed like that any normal person would see the handwriting on the wall. Still it doesn't surprise me."

"You think she's crazy? Have you talked to her since—"

"I plan to. She's being moved to Butler to isolation this afternoon." He consulted his watch. "She should be there right about now."

"She may be emotionally unstrung, but I doubt she's crazy."

Craven nodded at the doorway. "I stood there the night before last. I watched her try to suffocate the bedclothes. She looked up. You should have seen her eyes, son. I've seen that look before."

"What are you going to do with her at Butler?"

"She's to be examined by Dr. Howard Cairns. He's one of the finest and most reputable alienists in the East. If he decides she's sane she'll be transferred to the State Prison to await trial. If he finds her mentally incompetent he'll want her committed. You'll be asked to sign the necessary papers."

"I don't care what he decides. If she's crazy I am."

"Sometimes I think there isn't a soul I know who isn't off the line a little bit, at least once in awhile. The human mind is a complicated apparatus."

"She's clever, even brilliant. And totally ruthless; she hasn't a drop of conscience in her whole body."

"I can't imagine why she'd do such a thing. She's always been treated like one of the family. Given everything she ever wanted. But for an accident of fate she'd be your stepmother now. She always seemed so placid and contented, even a little withdrawn. It's extraordinary. Shakespeare was right: fire that's closest kept burns most of all."

"Ahem."

It was Tom Overstreet filling the doorway, his hat in his hands, turning the brim through them nervously.

"Tom?"

"I've got bad news, Ross. Your Aunt Lavinia's escaped."

"When? How?"

"Sit, tell us." Craven pushed a chair under him. Overstreet sinking into it. His face was wrinkled with worry, his eyes darting to the bed as if to assure himself that Lisa was unharmed.

"I just got it from the police. They came to the yard to tell you. I came as fast as I could."

"For God's sakes, man, what happened?"

"They were moving her with another prisoner. The two of them were in the back of the van with a guard. She had a knife hidden on her. She killed the prisoner and wounded the guard. He's in bad shape. The driver up top couldn't see, you know, he didn't suspect a thing."

"Go on," said Ross.

"Once she'd gotten rid of the two of them they think she must have tried to break the back door lock with the knife. There were marks all over it. She couldn't do it, so she burned the assembly clean out of the door!"

"Burned it?"

"It was all black around the edge, the lock, the latch, all of it dropped out into the street. The driver heard it. He saw her running away, but by the time he got down and after her she was between the buildings and out of sight."

"Where did it happen?"

"About a mile from the hospital, Academy Avenue. You know those houses, stacked along both sides of the street like books. Once in between a couple and back into the yards a dozen men couldn't find her."

Craven grabbed Ross by the shoulder. "She'll be coming back here! And she's armed."

"Tom, go to the jail. Get ahold of whoever's in charge and tell him I want two men for guard duty, one for inside this room, one for the corridor. Fast as he can get 'em here."

"That's no good," said Craven. "You sit a man outside and you might as well tack a three-foot sign on the door: '*She's in here!*' One man inside is enough, as long as he's got a gun. They can change every eight hours around the clock."

"Okay. Get on it, Tom!"

—He was gone, his heels clicking rapidly down the bare wooden floor of the corridor.

"She'd be out of her mind to show her face around here!" exclaimed Ross.

"Didn't I hear you say she's not?"

"I'll stay here. I'll sit here with the guard."

"And what will that get you, beyond losing you a decent night's sleep?" Craven paused, his jaw slacking, his eyes suddenly alive with astonishment. "Great God in heaven!"

"What?"

"Look at her forehead!"

Hurrying to the bedside they leaned over Lisa.

"Perspiration," said Ross in an awed tone.

Fumbling in his pocket, Craven pulled out his stethoscope, positioning it over her heart and listening intently, checking her pulse with his free hand at the same time. A broad smile flooded his face.

"She's coming around, her heart, her pulse. Look, look at the color coming into her cheeks!"

"She's sweating bullets!" His hand shot out grasping hers.

"Don't touch her. Be patient, give it a few seconds."

Like the sun breaking through cloud cover the waxen look of death slowly gave way to the faint pink presence of life, the flesh of her face and hands, her lips, the color rising steadily. And as they stared transfixed, her chest began rising and falling, the movement barely discernible at first, then becoming more pronounced in a slow and steady rhythm. And still the perspiration continued flooding from her pores, as if it were being pushed outward by some internal force. From the heights of her face it ran down her temples, the sides of her cheeks and the underside of her chin onto her neck, coursing down either side to the sheet beneath. Taking the corner of the upper sheet, Craven began blotting her face gently. And still it came pouring out of her.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, Ross elbowed him aside, snatching up both her hands. "Lisa, darling—"

The eyelids flickered and he shouted in triumph.

"Easy," cautioned Craven, "musn't shock her."

In a sudden impulse, Ross leaned over and kissed her eyes, one, the other and back to the first. "Lisa?"

She opened her eyes.

## XVI

Six days passed, the most glorious, the most joyous interval in life Ross ever experienced. She had come around beautifully, stage by stage, like a flower imprisoned in its bud sheath, the life force overpowering its grip, breaking it, declaring its inflorescence, displaying its fragile loveliness to the eye of the sun. She had recognized him, whispering his name, then lapsed into unconsciousness again exhausted by the effort. She had stopped perspiring, full color had returned to her flesh and her breathing appeared regular and quite normal. And the winsome half-smile usually visible on her face when she was asleep showed itself.

That first night, she had awakened a second time and taken food. And from that point forward she began regaining her strength. On the afternoon of the third day Craven delivered the good news.

"Promise me faithfully you'll go right to bed and stay there until the day after tomorrow at the earliest, and I shall let you go home."

Ross had stayed by her bedside since the beginning, a bed brought in, permitting him to sleep there. A guard was posted, sitting in a chair by the door, a pistol on his lap and the bored look on his face totally indifferent to the miracle being wrought in his presence.

Lavinia had not been found. The police were combing the city, but not a single clue to her whereabouts was uncovered. The guard accompanying her to Butler in the van fought for his life for two days before passing on.

Lisa was in no hurry to tell Ross what had happened to her, aware that there was no way he could possibly guess. She simply did not feel up to it the first

or even the second day. And he had no questions for her beyond "How do you feel?" and "Can I get you anything?"

She awoke to a clear and generously beautiful day on the morning of her third day home, the air crisp with autumn, the sun drenching the woods and the hills beyond. A mourning dove, its long pointed tail trailing along a branch framed by the upper half of the bedroom window, serenaded her with its melancholy song, and from deep in the woods came the steady and insistent bickering of bluejays. Life, she reflected, announcing its existence, the world of the present flaunting its beauty, a beauty too long denied her. But she had made it back, whole and healthy, back to the feel of his arms about her, his whispered love and affection, the warmth of his kisses.

Rising, she stood before the mirror. To see her face again, to be able to touch her hair and eyes and lips with the tips of her fingers filled her with a joy that bordered on ecstasy. Standing before the glass, she closed her eyes mentally picturing Janet Stiles's face and hair. The poor creature, poor Meggo and Walter Fitzgibbons, Elison, Millicent, all of them, dead, buried and forgotten, the years washing over their graves and those who remembered them dead and gone as well. It had been so incredible, so utterly grotesque, with so many mystifying aspects to it, in the beginning especially. Going to bed and to sleep, the awful nightmare and waking up in her room in the Cock and Fiddle, the shock of it, the smell of cabbage, Meggo's face. . . .

Ross broke into her thoughts sending them fleeing like dead leaves cartwheeling over a pavement. He brought in breakfast—and Cyrus, his stick thumping the floor loudly, his small body jerking doll-like as he approached a chair. So pleased was he at her rapid progress he made no effort to conceal it . . .

"We're going to fill you full to bursting with good food. Get some fat on your bones!"



"I'll get as big as a house." She laughed musically.

"Nice and plump, that's what a woman ought to be. Ross, I was always saying to your mother, 'You're too skinny!' And that bitch sister of hers looked like a wraith from the grave, bones sticking out all over."

"Has anybody heard anything about her?" asked Lisa.

Ross shook his head. "They're still looking."

"They'll never find her, she's far too clever."

"Not so clever she didn't give herself away!" snorted Cyrus. "If she dares show her pasty face around here, I'll bust it open for her," he added, brandishing his stick. He looked at one, then the other, grinning impishly. "You don't want me in here, either of you, do you?"

"Stay," said Lisa.

He waved this away and started for the door. "I'll see you at supper tonight, Mrs. Dandridge. We're having chicken. I'm going to personally stuff you!"

"I should think about getting to work," said Ross as the door closed.

"Not yet, go in later."

"Something wrong? Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm fine, I have to talk to you. Now. I feel like it. What I have to say is going to sound like absolute nonsense, darling, but listen and don't interrupt me. I'll answer all your questions when I'm done."

He listened as she detailed her dream on that fateful night and all the principal subsequent events, in Blyth, in Mansfield, in London. It took nearly two hours to arrive at the initiation ceremony.

"They were coming up the hill from both sides, there must have been hundreds. They wanted to catch us in the act. If it hadn't been for Elison it would have been all over then and there. She did it all, Ross, everything that had to be done, in its time, in the correct way. She turned an absolute disaster inside out and gave me back

my life!" He suppressed a smile. "You think I'm imagining it all, don't you?"

"Darling—"

"You think it was all a dream."

"You've got to admit it's an awful mouthful to take in. You tell me not to ask any questions."

"It was no dream, it happened, every incident, every moment!"

"How can you be so certain you didn't dream it all?"

"That's easy. Dreams are always the same. You know, insubstantial and disjointed. An episode starts and suddenly cuts off, the plot changing. You're being chased or you can't get where you simply have to be, matter of life and death; but it's never continuous, never day—night, day—night. Never minute after minute clear as a bell. And have you ever fallen asleep in a dream? Have you ever had a dream inside another dream? When they cleansed and purified my blood in preparation for the ceremony I was unconscious, Ross. I dreamt I was swimming for my life in that hideous pool filled with naked people."

"If you say so."

"It's not if I say so, damn it! Don't humor me! I didn't dream it, I didn't imagine it, I'm not crazy!" She leveled her index finger at him. "I'll prove it. I'll prove every word I've told you is the God's truth. Bring me that candle on the bureau."

He did and she promptly snapped her fingers and lit it.

"I'll be damned!"

"Please, don't use that word. Shall I go on, or am I boring you?"

"You're not boring me. How did the three of you get off that hill without being caught and why hold such a ceremony up there in the first place? Anybody could see the candles from down below, couldn't they?"

"Not through the trees. They were like a wall around us. Anyway, there was this clump of earth, a sort of

hillock with a passage under it, the opening covered with grass. We had to get down on all fours and crawl inside. Mind you, I had the robe she'd given back to me but no time to slip into it. I scratched my stomach something fierce."

"*Your stomach?*"

"Very good, now you're getting the idea. We hid in there all night and most of the next morning. We could scarcely breathe, it was so cramped and stuffy. Shortly after daybreak it began raining and Elison insisted we stay there until it stopped. When it did we headed back to Tilt Yard, running all the way."

"If you'd escaped from that prison—"

"The Marshalsea."

"Why go back to her place? Wouldn't that be the first place the constables would look for you?"

"There was nowhere else we could go. Everything she needed to prepare me for returning was there. We ran upstairs. They lay me down on the old lady's bed. It was all so rushed and jumbled; I woke up once during it, half-woke. I could hear pounding on the downstairs door."

"You made it in the nick of time."

She nodded. "If it was the law down there—and I don't doubt it for a second—when they finally did get in all they found was Janet's body."

"You left your friends in quite a fix."

"Not really. Once they started flinging accusations around all Elison would have to do is tell them I arrived exhausted and died. They might suspect she helped me get out, but there's no way to prove it."

He took her hand in his own and examined her fingertip. "The way you lit that candle. It really is witchcraft."

"It seems to run in the family."

"Dear Aunt Lavinia, a witch."

"An old hand at it, Ross. I'll bet she knows every trick in the book."

He got up from the side of the bed and went to the window, looking out upon the woodland. "She's out there somewhere, watching us, waiting."

"Let her come, she can't hurt us."

"You underestimate her. She's already killed two people and tried her damndest to kill you."

"I can handle her. There's something more I must tell you."

She detailed her pact with Elison, and, as she half-expected he greeted with a smirk the news of the future of their firstborn child. He showed nothing resembling concern.

"I wouldn't worry about that. You're talking about 1665, Lisa, it's all dead and gone now."

"It isn't."

"You signed a piece of paper and pledged your oath one hundred eighty-five years ago. That paper has to be crumpled to dust by now. Even if it does still exist, your signature must be so faded it's illegible. The whole thing's about as bonafide and subject to collection as George Washington's tailor's bill."

"I'm sorry. I know what they can do. Time and distance mean nothing to them. In witchcraft there are no barriers, none!"

"I have to respectfully disagree. Listen to yourself. You make it sound as if one day you'll be sitting in the study rocking our daughter or our son and somebody will come up to the door waving that piece of paper under Thursby's nose, come to collect."

"I don't know how it's going to be. I expect that's what worries me so. But I took that oath, I signed that paper in blood. I had to get back. There was no other way."

"I understand all that, I just don't see why it should upset you so. If anybody tries to take our child from us I'll give them a bullet in the belly. It's as simple as that."

"I only wish it were."

"It's nonsense, Lisa. How can you even think such idiocy?"

"I lived through such idiocy. It was as real to me as *this*." She held her hand in front of her eyes. "And this finger that can light candles or paper or wood, like the wood around the lock and bolt in the door of a police van."

Suddenly he became sober. "You'd rather not have a child."

"I didn't say that."

"How do you propose to get around it?"

"I don't know, yet. I'll think of something."

"You're a strange one. You worry about something that happened two hundred years ago coming back to haunt us and yet Vinnie here and now doesn't concern you in the least."

"Because I'm no longer the wide-eyed trusting innocent I was. She knows I'm back, yes, but she's got to know I had to become a witch to get back. Which makes the sides even. If she's smart she'll think twice before making any future trouble for us. I don't underestimate her, but I don't underestimate myself, either."

"You still don't know her like I've come to these last few days. At this point I wouldn't put it past her to murder us all in our beds. Craven insists she's stark raving mad. Let's just hope the police find her before she can stir up anything more."

"I keep telling you, darling, they never will."

## XVII

Beyond the roseless garden walled to the house, beyond the marshalled legions of trees and up the path to the hills overlooking Blackwood, a lone figure crouched on a ledge, her eyes fixed on the house. Staring, she burned it to the ground in her imagination, telescoping the time of destruction, speedily reducing it to a mass of charred rubble, killing everyone trapped within its walls.

No. That would be too sudden. Too quickly done and over, and much too impersonal to be enjoyed—like sending poison to one's enemy and subsequently reading the notices of his death. Besides, killing the object of one's enmity was not nearly as satisfying as bringing him down slowly, with all the heartache and suffering that could possibly be inflicted upon him. So for now, let them live. Give them time to bring their happiness to full flower, time for a child to be born. Then, one day—with Ross's child. . . .

It began to rain, icy droplets deserting the billowing black clouds, plunging earthward, splattering the rock about her, plashing against her head and shoulders. Drawing her cloak more tightly about her, she reached underneath it taking a small muslin sack from her belt and setting it at her feet.

The rain came harder, lightning webbing the sullen sky. Thunder rolled, the Great Bear of the universe rousing itself from its sleep of centuries. On the mountaintop above her a lone tree stood braced against the sky, its branches bare, the bark half stripped from its trunk. Again the lightning flared, stretching in every direction, flailing the hidden stars, hurling blue-white

fire downward striking the tree. Its largest limb broke off, crashing to earth.

Ignoring it, she turned the bag upside down, spilling its contents at her feet, slivers of wood inscribed with runic symbols. Gathering them up in both hands, she moved them slowly side to side over the bare rock.

"Thoth, mighty god of the Ibis, heart of wisdom, soul of understanding, protect and guide me in this casting. Clear mine eyes and mind so that I may read and understand."

She cast the runes, sending them clattering across the rock. The glyphs were marked in a faint, fine line and difficult to read, forcing her to squint, but she could make out the tilted cross signifying the need for constraint and caution in her plans; and the right angle, the cen, signifying torch fire, a protection.

"I must know what is in His heart, the heart of my Lord and Master for whose body my body hungers, whose love consumes me. Tell me of Ledion."

Two glyphs leaped to the eye, the arrow pointing straight upward. She squealed happily. "Someone strong will love me! Yes! Yes!" And the vertical line with two angled horizontal branches on its right. "Ah, love fulfilled! Wonderful! Marvelous!"

There was a third and last rune, perfectly positioned, the blank piece, the Path of Karma, the predestined future that cannot be avoided. It was a clear warning of caution to go with the tilted cross, but hardly ominous enough in import to stem her elation. Stretching both arms heavenward, she raised herself, the rain splattering her face, running down her cheeks, a smile of pure joy spreading over her features.

"Ledion, Ledion, I come to you."

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”

I Peter: 5, 8.



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